Interminable Enigma: Joyce Carol Oates's Reimagining of Detective Fiction

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TITRE

INTERMINABLE ENIGMA: JOYCE CAROL OATES'S REIMAGINING OF DETECTIVE FICTION

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Note on the layout of the text:

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In memory of Evelyn Tromble and Kenneth Lafavour,
whose love is not mysterious.

The work of art, for all its gorgeous beauty and perfection, or near-perfection, even for all its marvelous voice, its music, is curiously mute: shy and coy and unspoken-of: until another person comes along to snatch it up in his or her arms and bear it aloft, crying out for all to hear This is a masterpiece! I will tell you why; and in so doing I will, of course, put forth certain ideas of my own. . . .

- Joyce Carol Oates[1]

Crimes can occur without mystery. Mysteries can occur without crime. Violent and irrevocable actions can destroy lives but bring other lives together in unforeseeable, unimaginable ways.

- Joyce Carol Oates[2]

[1] Greg Johnson, ed., *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates: 1973-1982* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 175. Hereafter abbreviated as *JJCO*.

[2] Joyce Carol Oates, Introduction, *The Best American Mystery Stories 2005*, eds. Joyce Carol Oates and Otto Penzler (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005) xiii.

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In 1995, my high school senior English teacher, Alma Harris, instructed us to choose an author who had written at least three books. The project was to do stylistic analysis on three works by the same author. My grandmother Evelyn and my aunt Kristen encouraged me to choose the work of Joyce Carol Oates for the subject of my study. Thus it was that I spent my final year of high school reading and studying Oates's *The Assassins*, *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and a third work which for the life of me I cannot remember. At the end of the year, I received the award for Senior English Student of the Year. When it came time to begin my Masters work in 2002, I returned to Oates's fiction. I had recently read *Middle Age: A Romance* and Oates was once again on my mind. My decision to study Oates's fiction was based on my appreciation of her work. My decision to write a dissertation was prompted by my sense of personal pride: my brothers, Roy and Evan, were getting doctorates, I did not want to be left out!

I am blessed with the support of a loving family that has always encouraged me and never held me back. I am doubly blessed to have an equally supportive husband and family-in-law. Many of my family members helped me in more tangible ways as well. My husband, Sylvain Giraud, edited my French summary and provided support in times of crisis. My mom, Roné, helped me with references. Evan commented on one of my chapters, provided room and board so I could use the OU library, checked out books, scanned documents for me, and coached me on how to generate a table of contents and an index. My aunt Meredith provided priceless editing advice. Kristen gave me her entire Oates library. My dad, Galen, Roy, and many others gave me books for Christmases and birthdays.

I also have wonderful friends who helped me greatly and inspired me to work harder. I would particularly like to thank Guillaume Bauer for our long conversations and his theoretical insights, Jocelyn Dupont for his encouragement and editing suggestions, and Gérald Préher for providing documents, helping me edit, and generally keeping me on my toes!

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Summary

From the beginning of her career fifty years ago, Joyce Carol Oates has incessantly devoted both her fiction and non-fiction writing to the exploration of the mysteries of life. Several themes are consistently present in her fiction, including the investigation into what constitutes the individual, how people relate to the world around them, the problems that arise in interpreting one's experiences, and the difference between dream and reality. The hybrid nature of Oates's work defies easy categorization. However, more and more of her novels recall elements of detective and crime fiction, though the writer herself prefers the label "mystery and suspense" stories. Such a distinction is far from trivial as the four works analyzed in this study, *Rape: A Love Story, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *The Falls*, correspond only partially to the conventions of detective fiction. The goal of this study is to examine the way in which Oates rewrites detective fiction, making it correspond to her enigmatic vision of the world, giving it a more human dimension that perhaps speaks more fully to contemporary readers.

Keywords: American Literature, Detective Fiction, Mystery, Rewriting, Real, Unreal, Society

Enigme interminable :
Comment Joyce Carol Oates réécrit le roman policier

Résumé

Depuis le début de sa carrière il y a cinquante ans, les écrits de Joyce Carol Oates – ses récits de fiction tout autant que ses récits non-fictionnels – n'ont cessé d'explorer de manières diverses les mystères de la vie. Etudier ce qui constitue l'individu, ce qui le caractérise dans sa relation avec le monde, les problèmes qu'il peut avoir pour interpréter ses expériences et sa façon de comprendre la différence entre rêve et réalité sont des thématiques que l'on retrouve dans toute sa fiction. En ce qui concerne la forme qu'elle adopte pour véhiculer ces notions thématiques, ses œuvres ont toujours manifesté une certaine hybridité et on arrive difficilement à les classer dans une catégorie particulière. De plus en plus, les romans d'Oates rappellent la fiction policière mais l'écrivaine préfère parler d'histoires de « mystère et suspens » plutôt que d'employer le libellé « roman policier ». Elle a peut-être raison car bien que faisant penser au roman policier, les œuvres étudiés – *Rape : A Love Story, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts,* et *The Falls* – ne correspondent que partiellement aux conventions du genre. Cette thèse à pour but d'examiner la façon dont Oates réécrit le policier pour le plier à sa vision énigmatique du monde, le rendant ainsi plus humain et plus pertinent aux lecteurs contemporains.

Mots-clés : littérature américaine, roman policier, mystère, réécriture, réel, irréel, société

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RESUME EN FRANÇAIS

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates a publié sa première nouvelle en 1959. Depuis, le rythme de ses publications et la régularité avec laquelle elle publie font qu'on la qualifie d'auteure « prolifique ». A ce jour, en août 2010, son œuvre compte cinquante-sept romans (y compris ceux apparus sous les pseudonymes Rosamond Smith et Lauren Kelly) et trente-deux recueils de nouvelles. De plus, elle a écrit des essais critiques, des pièces de théâtre, des poèmes, des livres pour adolescents et des livres pour enfants. Le premier ouvrage critique sur son œuvre paraît en 1978. Une grande partie de l'introduction de mon étude est un recensement des ouvrages critiques écrits à propos des romans d'Oates ; on peut ainsi situer ce travail par rapport aux recherches publiées jusqu'ici. Je divise ces ouvrages en trois groupes définis de façon chronologique. Le premier volet regroupe les livres de Mary Kathryn Grant, G. F. Waller, Joanne Creighton et Ellen Friedman publiés entre 1978 et 1980. Le deuxième volet est composé des études de Eileen Teper Bender, Marilyn Wesley, Joanne Creighton (deuxième volume), Brenda Daly et Nancy Ann Watanabe publiées entre 1987 et 1998. Enfin, le troisième volet concerne les points de vue critiques du vingt-et-unième siècle, notamment l'ouvrage de Gavin Cologne-Brookes sorti en 2005.

Les quatre volumes du premier volet furent écrits indépendamment les uns des autres. Cependant, ils s'intéressent globalement aux mêmes problématiques. Ils étudient les thèmes évoqués dans les romans – les mystères de la vie, la quête de la libération de soi, et le besoin d'établir des relations humaines – et démontrent que ceux-ci reflètent les idées exprimées dans les essais de l'écrivaine. Ils se positionnent contre les critiques qui déplorent l'usage de la violence dans les romans. Pourtant le recours des scènes brutales semble légitime puisqu'elle reproduit une partie intégrante de la vie américaine contemporaine. De plus, la

violence est le résultat inévitable des problèmes de communication mis en scène dans la fiction oatesienne. Cependant, malgré la présence de la violence qui se fait sentir un peu partout, ces critiques maintiennent que la vision de l'auteure n'est pas noire. Au contraire, elle croit toujours aux capacités des individus à évoluer et laisse entrevoir une lueur d'espoir.

Les préoccupations du deuxième volet qui débuta en 1987 ont changé. *Bellefleur* (1980) fut un roman à succès et les livres d'Oates commencèrent à être lus plus largement. Oates occupa dès lors une position importante aux yeux du public, à ceux des critiques et au sein de l'université. Tandis que les premières études traitaient prioritairement des thèmes de l'auteure afin de montrer la cohérence de sa vision esthétique et de justifier son recours à des sujets gênants, les études de la deuxième période ont fait porter l'accent sur la forme et l'effet de la fiction. Elles ont insisté sur la qualité expérimentale et intertextuelle de l'œuvre et la façon dont ses histoires et ses structures, toutes deux transgressives, servent à remettre en question l'ordre patriarcal de la société et à formuler une vision alternative et féministe de la littérature et de la société. Ce changement de préoccupation critique fut suivi parallèlement par un changement d'intérêt notable de la part de l'auteure. A cette époque, Oates commence à s'intéresser d'avantage à des personnages féminins. En outre, elle se livre de plus en plus à la parodie et l'usage de formes non conventionnelles. Qu'elles fassent une lecture intertextuelle ou féministe des romans d'Oates, les auteurs de ces cinq études insistent sur la nature non-conformiste de ces textes. Oates écrit des histoires qui se déroulent dans un monde en changement perpétuel. De ce fait, elle évite le cloisonnement dans un système d'idées.

Les points de vue les plus récents continuent à souligner le caractère expérimental et hybride de sa fiction ainsi que sa valeur en tant que critique sociale. Pour le moment, un seul ouvrage critique a été publié depuis le début du vingt-et-unième siècle. L'étude de Gavin Cologne-Brookes présente Oates comme une écrivaine pragmatique dans la droite lignée de William James et considère que son œuvre propose une vision pragmatique du monde. Le

travail de Oates est révisionniste et montre combien elle partage les dogmes traditionnels dont James est le porte-parole. En effet, elle exprime non seulement la faillibilité du dogme mais aussi l'influence de la société sur la formation de l'individu, le pluralisme, l'adaptabilité et l'individualité.

La deuxième partie de l'introduction se charge d'expliquer les choix de sujet et de corpus de cette étude. Oates est un écrivain qui innove constamment avec les genres dans son projet de transcrire la vie contemporaine à travers sa fiction. De plus, sa fiction traite de plus en plus des histoires de crimes. Le but de cette thèse est donc d'évaluer dans quelle mesure le recours d'Oates à la fiction policière peut être lu comme un commentaire sur la culture contemporaine. J'ai opté pour une étude de romans, et ce pour deux raisons. D'abord, l'écrivaine elle-même a exprimé une préférence pour cette forme. Ensuite, c'est avec ses romans que ses histoires de crimes sont les plus développées. Cette étude montrera qu'Oates s'approprie et réécrit la fiction policière afin d'encourager ses lecteurs à réfléchir sur la rigidité des formes traditionnelles et de favoriser l'acceptation des mystères de la vie.

L'œuvre d'Oates est très vaste. Il a donc été nécessaire de limiter le champ de cette étude à quelques romans qui servent à illustrer son travail récent. Comme elle s'intéresse actuellement à diverses variétés de crimes, j'ai choisi d'étudier les romans du vingt-et-unième siècle. J'ai commencé ce travail en 2004. De 2000 à 2004, Oates a publié neuf romans (je n'ai pas compté les romans visant un lectorat adolescent). En excluant les romans publiés sous des pseudonymes et d'autres appartenant à une trilogie consacrée au thème de la célébrité, il en restait cinq : *Beasts*, *I'll Take You There*, *The Tattooed Girl*, *Rape: A Love Story* et *The Falls*. *I'll Take You There* a été également exclu car il ne comporte pas l'élément de crime que l'on retrouve dans les quatre autres. Cette étude est divisée en trois parties. Chaque partie examine la notion d'énigme d'un point de vue différent.

Première partie

La première partie comporte quatre chapitres qui cherchent à situer le corpus au sein de l'œuvre d'Oates et de son projet global qui est d'explorer les mystères de la vie auxquels elle fait souvent référence dans son journal. Ces chapitres montrent que les quatre romans du corpus sont liés à l'œuvre générale à travers les thèmes suivants : le mystère des relations humaines, les fantasmagories constitutives de la personnalité, la nature problématique du désir, et la nécessité d'accepter les aspects incompréhensibles de la vie. Chaque chapitre explore un de ces thèmes par le biais d'un roman précis.

Chapitre 1

Un des personnages de la nouvelle « You » (dans le recueil *The Wheel of Love* publié en français avec le titre *Corps*) identifie la famille comme le lieu des mystères les plus profonds. En effet, les relations familiales font partie des situations les plus opaques que les personnages doivent affronter. Le premier chapitre examine plusieurs mystères de la famille évoqués dans *The Falls* (*Les Chutes*). Les personnages de ce roman luttent pour savoir de quoi sont constituées leurs identités car l'individu, la société et la famille ont souvent des idées opposées à ce sujet. Ce chapitre s'intéresse d'abord à la question de l'identité et de la quête de soi avant d'élargir le champ d'investigation aux relations familiales. Enfin, j'explore la façon dont les personnages perçoivent la différence entre le rêve et la réalité.

La première section examine les conséquences de la quête de soi sur la vie des personnages principaux. Les deux époux d'Ariah sont des personnages anachroniques pour lesquels la quête d'identité a des conséquences négatives. Ariah est paralysée par la peur, ce

qui l'empêche de poser des questions sur sa vie. C'est seulement avec les enfants que les quêtes peuvent aboutir à des résultats positifs. Ces histoires montrent l'importance de la quête du sens dans la fiction d'Oates. L'abandonner, ou même, ne pas l'envisager ne peut mener qu'à la stagnation ou à la mort.

La deuxième section traite des relations entre les personnages. Lorsque les quêtes individuelles n'aboutissent pas à des réponses satisfaisantes, les personnages cherchent du sens dans les relations avec autrui. Créer des liens peut créer du sens, mais en même temps ces relations soulèvent d'autres mystères. Le premier instinct est de chercher à établir des liens au sein de sa propre famille. Cependant, les expériences des personnages montrent que les relations familiales sont aussi problématiques que les relations extrafamiliales. Dans ce roman, la rigidité des familles a des effets néfastes sur les personnages qui ne sont pas assez forts pour couper les liens. Le mystère exploré dans cette section est donc de savoir si la famille nous soutient ou nous enfonce.

La troisième section examine la façon dont les personnages comprennent leurs expériences énigmatiques. Cette compréhension est rendue plus difficile par les réactions de l'inconscient bien réelles, mais qui sont en même temps insaisissables, et par le fait que le langage est souvent inapte à formuler une représentation exacte des choses vécues. Pour transcrire ce fait, le style d'Oates, qu'elle appelle « psychological realism », essaie de crédibiliser ses personnages en évoquant leurs rêves, leurs pensées et leurs réactions émotionnelles. La tendance naturelle à transformer le passé en mythe est donc utilisée pour donner forme aux mystères de l'expérience et de la mémoire.

Oates croit à l'importance de la quête du sens. Cependant, elle croit aussi que le sens nous échappera toujours. Ceci est évident dans *The Falls*, un roman qui soulève des questions intemporelles sur l'importance de l'inconscient, les effets néfastes de l'amour, et l'existence du mal. Le texte ne propose pas de réponse définitive à ces interrogations. A la place, il

suggère que l'adaptabilité est la clef pour réussir à naviguer dans les eaux troubles de l'incompréhensible.

Chapitre 2

Le sujet du chapitre est l'activité fantasmagorique propre à la personnalité dépeinte dans *The Tattooed Girl* (*La Fille tatouée*). La première section porte sur la structure du roman qui met en avant l'insaisissabilité de la personnalité. Trois points de vue, ceux de Seigl, Dmitri et Alma sont juxtaposés, ce qui a pour effet de montrer que les analyses des personnages ne s'accordent pas les unes avec les autres, ce qui renforce l'idée d'instabilité et de l'incommensurabilité de la personnalité. Par exemple, Seigl et Dmitri ont tous les deux des avis opposés au sujet d'Alma. Celle-ci n'arrive pas toujours à fournir des réponses aux questions soulevées par ces écarts d'appréciation car elle ne se comprend pas toujours. Le lecteur se demande donc qui est la vraie Alma, élément qui demeure sans réponse.

Oates développe les notions de « day-side » (*côté clair*) et « night-side » (*côté sombre*) de la personnalité. Le « day-side » est le domaine des choix et expériences conscientes, tandis que le « night-side » est celui de l'inconscient, c'est-à-dire des souvenirs, des pensées, des émotions, des rêves, des hallucinations et des réflexes. C'est le « night-side » qui incarne tout ce qui est mystérieux dans la personnalité. La deuxième section montre à quel point les personnages du roman dépendent de leur côté obscur (night-side). En effet, ils ont souvent l'impression de ne pouvoir contrôler ni leurs pensées, ni leurs actions.

Certes, la personnalité comporte des côtés insaisissables, cependant, c'est sa nature fantasmagorique et adaptable qui crée la possibilité d'évolution, voire même de rédemption, pour les personnages. La troisième section examine le processus qui mène Seigl et Alma à

établir des liens, à échanger des idées et finalement à s'ouvrir à des idées nouvelles. Cette ouverture à autrui et à la multiplicité des sens, cette renonciation à la croyance dans une vérite, qui est présente au niveau du texte, touche également le lecteur. A travers le meurtre violent d'Alma dans les dernières pages du roman, Oates libère son lecteur de son obsession avec la vérité en montrant qu'il n'y a pas de vérité cachée au sein de l'histoire. Elle nous montre que la vérité ne peut être généralisée. Au contraire, la vérité est individuelle, et donc multiple. Le roman ne peut donc fournir de solution aux mystères de la vie.

Chapitre 3

La novelette *Beasts* (*Délicieuses pourritures*) est traitée dans ce chapitre comme un commentaire sur la nature problématique du désir. La narratrice obtient ce qu'elle convoite, cependant, cette réussite ne lui apporte pas de joie particulière ; elle la transforme en victime. La question du point de vue est également importante car contrairement aux autres œuvres du corpus, celle-ci n'en comporte qu'un, celui de la narratrice, à savoir Gillian, qui raconte son histoire à la première personne.

Le but de la première section du chapitre est de savoir si la narratrice est digne de confiance car on sait que les narrateurs à la première personne peuvent dissimuler des informations. D'abord on remarque que Gillian dit une chose, mais souvent en fait une autre, ce qui indique la nature problématique de ses paroles. De plus, son langage se caractérise par l'hésitation et montre son incapacité à comprendre ce qui se passe autour d'elle. Aussi a-t-on du mal à la croire lorsqu'elle dit être une victime ou ne rien savoir à propos de l'origine des incendies sur le campus universitaire. Au mieux, la vision de la narratrice est partielle. Au

pire, elle dissimule délibérément son vrai rôle dans les événements. La novelette ne permet pas au lecteur de trancher. Dans *Beasts,* mystère et vision limitée sont intimement liés.

Dans la deuxième section je m'intéresse de plus près à la nature problématique du désir pour montrer que bien qu'elle soit une victime, Gillian a également une part de responsabilité dans ce qui lui arrive. C'est elle qui fait le premier pas vers son professeur en décidant de le séduire. C'est elle qui choisit de faire des actes transgressifs. Néanmoins, ce processus de transgression et de victimisation donne à Gillian la possibilité de s'affirmer.

Un aspect quelque peu dérangeant des œuvres d'Oates est que le processus d'émancipation des personnages passe souvent par la victimisation des autres. L'affirmation et la revanche de Gillian exigent la mort des deux agresseurs. C'est ainsi qu'elle devient un individu autonome occupant une place légitime au sein de la société. Ce processus est accompagné tout au long du récit par des images de feu. Donc, pour clore le chapitre, j'examine l'image du feu à travers l'analyse de Gilbert Durand qui a soulevé l'ambiguïté de telles images qui peuvent accompagner également les thèmes de l'initiation et de la purification.

Chapitre 4

Les deux victimes de *Rape : Love Story* (*Viol, une histoire d'amour*) sont également obsédées. Elles sont obsédées par le fait de ne pas pouvoir donner un sens à ce qui est arrivé dans le parc le soir du 4 juillet. Ce roman explore d'autres thèmes oatesiens récurrents, notamment le regard dur des autres sur les victimes de viol et le bouleversement qui accompagne les changements forcés de la vie.

La première section traite la question du sens. Dans *Rape*, « pourquoi ? » est une question sans réponse, ce qui crée une source d'angoisse supplémentaire pour les victimes d'agression violente et de viol. Le fait qu'un acte peut faire si mal mais ne rien signifier, est vécu comme une deuxième violence, cette fois mentale, infligée aux victimes. Même les violeurs ne peuvent pas fournir de réponse. Il n'y avait pas de mobile pour l'agression, il a eu lieu spontanément. La nature problématique des chronologies est donc mise en valeur car la novelette montre que ce qui lie les événements n'est jamais aussi clair que les événements eux-mêmes.

Non seulement les victimes ont du mal à comprendre l'expérience dont ils ont été victimes, mais elles ont également du mal à faire accepter la vérité aux autres. Pour le lecteur, qui connaît le point de vue des victimes, les faits semblent évidents. La question de la justice ne devrait donc pas être problématique. Oates montre, néanmoins, que ce n'est pas le cas. Il y a deux sources de scepticisme. D'abord, l'opinion publique. Ensuite, la cour de justice. La deuxième section du chapitre examine donc la nature problématique de la vérité et du regard des autres. L'absence de mobile pour le viol contribue au fait que la cour ne puisse pas établir la véracité des faits. Il semble que le système judiciaire ne puisse pas juger les actions irrationnelles. « Justice » est donc rendue dans cette novelette non par le système judiciaire, mais par un personnage – Dromoor, un policier – qui s'occupe lui-même de punir les violeurs, ce qui m'amène, dans un deuxième temps, à examiner à quel point ses exécutions peuvent être considérées comme « justes ».

La troisième section examine l'idée d'amour évoquée par le sous-titre (*Une histoire d'amour*) de la novelette. *Rape* est l'histoire des effets d'un viol sur les relations entre les personnages. On peut recenser plusieurs types d'amour. L'amour que Dromoor ressent pour Teena et sa fille est lié aux idées de justice et de responsabilité. Bethie aime Dromoor car il les protège. Les violeurs « aiment » le fait d'exercer un contrôle sur les victimes. On

comprend donc que le sens du mot n'est pas fixé. Cependant, tous ces types d'amour ont quelque chose en commun, le fait de servir de justification à des actes violents. Dans la fiction oatesienne, les victimes deviennent agresseurs et le cycle de violence continue, il n'y a pas d'issue possible à ce processus d'action et de réaction.

Rape crée donc une expérience d'illisibilité pour le lecteur car le texte ne nous dirige pas vers une interprétation des faits. Est-ce que les actes de Dromoor sont justes ? Teena est-elle une bonne mère ? Est-ce que Bethie est heureuse de ses choix ? Nous ne pouvons pas l'affirmer.

Deuxième partie

La deuxième partie porte sur la façon dont les thèmes des mystères de la vie sont accentués par les stratégies textuelles de l'auteure. Des thèmes tels que l'aspect aléatoire de la vie et la difficulté à donner un sens à ses expériences, qui sont présents au niveau de la problématique, se font également sentir à travers la manière dont Oates transcrit ses histoires sur le papier, c'est-à-dire à travers ses choix typographiques, organisationnels, syntaxiques et sémantiques. Pour transcrire et renforcer la vie énigmatique de ses personnages, Oates a recours à l'usage d'éléments typographiques tels que les tirets et les points de suspension. Elle emploie également des italiques pour indiquer la nature différente de certaines pensées. De plus, elle joue avec l'ordre chronologique des événements afin de souligner les mystères des liens qui les rassemblent. Tout cela contribue à la création de personnages dotés d'identités à la fois inachevées et éphémères.

Chapitre 5

Ce chapitre se concentre sur l'emploi d'outils textuels qui tentent de palier aux insuffisances du langage. Selon Oates, le langage ne peut pas rendre compte de l'immédiateté du présent. Cette idée est explorée dans la première section du chapitre. Si les personnages ne peuvent pas comprendre ce qui leur arrive, il y a donc nécessairement un effet sur le langage qu'ils utilisent pour exprimer leurs expériences.

Dans la discussion sur les italiques dans la deuxième section, je prends *The Falls* comme exemple. Tout au long du texte on retrouve des mots et des phrases en italiques. Cette typographie traduit les pensées intimes des personnages qui demeureraient inaccessibles aux autres dans une situation réelle. Parfois il s'agit de pensées conscientes que les personnages décident de garder sous silence, d'autres fois les mots en italique représentent des pensées inconscientes que les personnages ne contrôlent pas. On comprend donc qu'il faut donner à ces interruptions dans le texte une autre dimension. Elles nous permettent d'accéder à la frontière entre l'inconscient et le conscient, entre le « night-side » et le « day-side » de la personnalité. Cette technique permet à l'auteure de dépeindre une réalité faite de plusieurs niveaux de conscience.

La troisième section explore la répétition utilisée par Oates dans *Beasts*. Ici, la répétition d'une phrase masque des instants de silence en se substituant à des idées que l'on n'arrive pas à exprimer, notamment l'intensité de l'émotion. Oates se sert de la répétition pour communiquer la passion de ses personnages. Les problèmes relationnels de Gillian sont multiples. En fait, elle a du mal à communiquer avec autrui. Ce sont de petits refrains obsédants – « Go for the jugular ! » et « We are beasts and this is our consolation » – qui transmettent la nature confuse de ses pensées et entraînent le lecteur dans le domaine mystérieux d'un personnage qui cherche toujours un sens mais ne le trouve jamais.

Enfin, à travers l'étude de *The Tattooed Girl*, j'examine les idées que le texte passe sous silence, obligeant le lecteur à déduire ce qui n'est pas dit. Ces non-dits sont tantôt représentés par des tirets ou des points de suspension, tantôt par des trous qui interrompent la chronologie. Les tirets et les points de suspension apparaissent le plus souvent au sein de dialogues ou de représentations des pensées des personnages. De fait, ils indiquent l'incapacité fréquente qu'ont les personnages à s'exprimer. Le lecteur est forcé d'interpréter ces symboles. Il se retrouve, donc, comme les personnages, à se demander « quoi ? » et « pourquoi ? ».

Chapitre 6

Le chapitre 6 explore comment la nature désordonnée des récits évoque les mystères des liens entre les personnes et les événements. La structure irrégulière des textes renforce pour le lecteur la confusion ressentie par les personnages.

La nature ambiguë des liens entre les événements est présente dans les textes à deux niveaux. D'abord, au niveau thématique, les personnages ont du mal à donner du sens aux expériences. Ensuite, au niveau structurel, Oates laisse des ellipses et oblige le lecteur à déduire ce qui manque. Ces trous et ce processus de déduction sont le sujet de la première section du chapitre. Le lecteur est limité par les points de vue à travers lesquels il reçoit l'information, ce qui souligne les problèmes d'interprétation auxquels nous sommes constamment confrontés.

Pour représenter la confusion qui règne dans les expériences des personnages, Oates mélange les éléments de ses récits comme s'il s'agissait de faire un collage. Points de vue, scènes et périodes chronologiques se confondent. Le lecteur doit identifier les éléments du

puzzle et les remettre dans l'ordre chronologique. Pour Oates, il s'agit d'une écriture cinématographique qui bascule souvent entre scènes et périodes chronologiques. Mais cette confusion s'opère également au sein d'une même scène. Il peut être difficile de suivre les pensées d'un personnage qui passe d'un sujet à un autre sans prévenir. L'instabilité et la fugacité des souvenirs sont donc soulignées.

Pour conclure le chapitre, la troisième section analyse la juxtaposition des points de vue dans les romans comme appartenant à une narration collective qui exprime un désir féministe de créer des modes alternatifs d'expression. Cette technique donne au lecteur une vision globale plus complexe de l'histoire. Cependant, cela ne veut pas dire qu'il donne un accès au sens. Certes, la narration collective donne une vision plus complète des événements, mais en même temps elle montre l'impossibilité d'arriver à la construction d'une vraie vision globale.

Chapitre 7

Les stratégies textuelles renforcent donc la nature fragmentée des personnalités et l'identité des personnages continuent à nous échapper. Dans ce chapitre, je me penche sur la façon dont le langage et les stratégies textuelles contribuent à décrire des personnages aux marges de la vie, luttant avec des identités changeantes. Six sections courtes explorent des théories qui essaient de rendre compte des identités aux frontières de l'expérience. Ces théories mettent en évidence la contemporanéité des personnages d'Oates.

Selon Marc Guillaume, suite aux changements sociaux nous avons créé une nouvelle façon d'être et de communiquer qu'il qualifie de « spectrale ». Son concept de la « spectralité » comprend les deux sens du mot « spectre » : le spectre comme fantôme, c'est-

à-dire la présence corporelle qui se dissipe ; et le spectre chromatique, composé d'éléments dispersés. « Etre spectral », selon lui, « c'est être à plusieurs faces, et n'engager qu'une face dans l'interface communicationnelle. » (Baudrillard et Guillaume 34) Cette théorie nous aide à comprendre les personnages d'Oates qui ont des comportements variant selon les situations dans lesquelles ils se trouvent.

Dans la fiction d'Oates, un des aspects de la dispersion du moi a son origine dans les énigmes du passé qui empêche le sujet de se projeter dans l'avenir. La théorie de la hantise développée par Jean-Jacques Lecercle permet de clarifier cette relation de cause à effet. Lecercle oppose deux termes : « spectre » et « hantise ». Le spectre est un fantôme, quelque chose du passé qui hante le sujet au présent, tandis que la hantise est un processus qui appartient à l'avenir. Lorsque un spectre ou une hantise (ou les deux ensemble) s'immisce dans le présent, c'est comme si le temps se pliait et que le sujet se trouve coincé dans un présent confus ou le passé, le présent et le futur se mélangent et obscurcissent la voie qui permettrait au sujet de résoudre son trauma.

Les énigmes qui hantent les personnages concernent souvent les familles, ce qui rappelle la théorie psychanalytique des états-limite selon laquelle on considère que les problèmes familiaux sont responsables de la détresse du sujet. Un patient état-limite, explique Judith Feher-Gurewich, paraît normal de l'extérieur, mais à l'intérieur il « souffre de rages incontrôlables, d'un vide intérieur, du manque d'estime de soi et il est le plus souvent incapable de créer des rapports affectifs durables » (Feher-Gurewich 29-30). Ce sont des symptômes que l'on peut relever chez les personnages d'Oates.

La notion de « phantom » développée par Nicolas Abraham s'ajoute aux théories précédentes pour donner plus de nuances. Ce ne sont pas les morts qui nous hantent, explique-t-il, mais les trous laissés au sein de nous par les secrets des autres. Ainsi, les parents créent

des « phantoms » chez leurs enfants en gardant des secrets sur leurs histoires sexuelles et psychiques. Ariah et ses enfants dans *The Falls* sont un bon exemple de ce processus.

Chez l'enfant, un exemple frappant de manifestation d'un secret du passé des parents est la scène avec Royall et la femme en noir dans *The Falls*. Cet épisode fantastique ne permet pas au lecteur de trancher sur la réalité des faits. Soit la femme en noir est imaginée par Royall. Soit elle existe vraiment. Dans tous les cas, sa fonction dans le texte reste fixe, elle sera donc la représentation du « phantom » créée par l'histoire secrète du passé de son père. Dans le contexte d'une œuvre qui décrit des êtres en marge, on aura tendance à pencher pour la première lecture, mais le texte lui-même ne désigne pas de ligne de conduite.

Enfin, une dernière section porte sur le trope de l'ombre qui apparaît souvent lorsqu'il s'agit d'illustrer la difficulté d'un sujet à réconcilier les phases – passé, présent et futur – de sa vie. Cet emploi de l'ombre est notamment présent dans *The Tattooed Girl* où Alma voit des « shadow figures » (personnages-ombre) à la périphérie de sa vision pendant son interrogatoire et Seigl décrit ses ancêtres morts dans les camps de concentration comme des ombres. Dans ce roman, les personnages hantés par des ombres deviennent eux-mêmes comme des ombres.

Troisième partie

Les deux premières parties me permettent d'établir que la nature énigmatique de la vie est mise en avant à chaque niveau de la fiction d'Oates. Ceci fait, je m'intéresse dans la troisième partie aux questions relevant plus précisément de la fiction policière. J'examine dans quelle mesure les romans du corpus peuvent être considérés comme des romans policiers en utilisant plusieurs critiques du genre comme repères : la typologie de Tzvetan Todorov,

l'analyse de Jerry Palmer, la théorie d'une littérature sensationnelle de Julian Symons, et la qualité parodique du polar développée par Benoît Tadié. Enfin, j'explore les répercussions des éléments policiers sur les mystères évoqués par le monde fictionnel d'Oates. Les intrigues policières évoluent traditionnellement vers des résolutions. Cependant, au lieu de proposer des solutions aux mystères invariablement soulevés par ses personnages, je montre que l'usage fait par Oates de la fiction policière sert paradoxalement à renforcer les énigmes évoquées par ses textes.

Chapitre 8

Ce chapitre compare les romans du corpus avec la typologie du roman policier de Todorov afin d'établir ce qu'ils retiennent du genre, ce qu'ils transforment et ce qu'ils abandonnent. Todorov identifie trois formes de fiction policière – le roman à énigme, le roman noir et le roman à suspens – qu'il distingue selon leurs structures et leurs thèmes.

Je commence par analyser la structure du roman à énigme. Ce type de roman est composé en fait de deux histoires : l'histoire du crime et l'histoire de l'investigation. Les deux histoires sont indépendantes l'une de l'autre. Le but est de résoudre l'énigme du crime. Ce roman est donc tourné vers le passé. De plus, pour maintenir le mystère le plus longtemps possible, il ne peut pas y avoir de narrateur omniscient. L'information est donc livrée uniquement par des points de vue individuels. Le lecteur du roman à énigme est donc curieux de connaître la solution de l'énigme que représente le crime. Je montre que ces éléments sont présents dans *Rape : A Love Story* et *The Falls* bien qu'ils débordent du cadre strict du roman à énigme.

Ensuite, je m'intéresse au deuxième type défini par Todorov, le roman noir. Dans le roman noir, les deux histoires sont fusionnées, c'est-à-dire que la narration et l'action coïncident. L'histoire du texte est dirigé vers l'avenir. Le lecteur veut savoir ce qu'il va advenir des personnages. Encore une fois, bien qu'ils ne se conforment pas strictement aux règles du genre, je relève des caractéristiques du roman noir dans *Beasts* and *The Tattooed Girl*.

Dans la troisième section, j'examine le corpus du point de vue des règles énumérées par Todorov concernant les thèmes et le discours du roman noir. Todorov montre que la différence entre roman à énigme et roman noir existe au niveau de la structure et au niveau thématique. Le niveau de discours, cependant, demeure inchangé. Le roman noir se distingue du roman à énigme au niveau thématique par son intérêt pour la violence, le crime sordide et les personnages amoraux. Je démontre que les thèmes du corpus correspondent en large partie aux thèmes du roman noir.

Pour clore ce chapitre, je m'intéresse au troisième type identifié par Todorov, le roman à suspens. Ce type de roman est un mélange des deux autres. On retrouve donc les deux histoires du passé et du présent, mais c'est l'histoire du présent qui reste au premier plan. Même si au niveau thématique divers aspects rappellent le roman noir, le caractère hybride des romans d'Oates correspond le mieux au roman à suspens qui est également une forme hybride. Cependant, il y a toujours quelque chose qui pose problème. Aucun roman du corpus ne correspond exactement à un des trois types de la typologie de Todorov. Ils rappellent le roman policier sans toutefois y correspondre totalement.

Chapitre 9

Ce chapitre s'intéresse de plus près au rôle des détectives. Quelles vérités essaient-ils de déceler ? Quelles réponses trouvent-ils à leurs problèmes ? Ces questions sont liées à la fonction sociale du roman policier qui a évolué avec le temps, ce que j'expose dans une première section. Le roman policier reflète l'éthique dominante de la société. Le détective du roman à énigme, en vogue à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle et au début du vingtième, était le représentant du *statu quo*. Ses enquêtes montraient un monde ordonné ou le crime ne paye jamais. De cette façon, il rassurait les classes moyennes inquiètes au sujet des mouvements sociaux chez les classes ouvrières. Le roman noir, par contre, développé au vingtième siècle à l'époque des guerres mondiales, reflète l'évolution des mentalités de l'époque. Les aventures du détective « hard-boiled » transcrivent l'aliénation de l'homme de l'après-guerre face à la corruption et l'anarchie de la société.

Dans un deuxième temps, j'examine les détectives d'Oates afin d'esquisser leur fonction sociale et d'établir ce qu'ils peuvent montrer comme éthique dominante du vingt-et-unième siècle. La lecture que je propose des détectives dans le corpus montre que leurs enquêtes accentuent un sentiment d'incertitude et renforcent l'absence d'autorité narrative. Un écrivain ne peut pas donner le vrai sens d'une œuvre et un détective ne peut pas fournir de sens aux expériences. L'éthique dominante de ces textes est donc une vision post-humaniste qui nie la possibilité de trouver un sens unique à tout.

Chapitre 10

La typologie de Todorov est utile pour discerner les caractéristiques du roman policier. Cependant, les œuvres du corpus ne se conforment pas aux règles du genre. Peut-on malgré tout les lire en tant que romans policiers ? Dans ce chapitre, j'examine les théories des critiques Jerry Palmer et Julian Symons afin de voir si elles peuvent mieux qualifier les œuvres d'Oates. Leurs points de vue sont plus vastes et renforcent le lien qu'a le genre avec le thème de la violence.

La théorie du roman noir de Palmer comprend trois élément principaux : la légitimité de la violence, la particularité du ton qui comporte un aspect morne et une impression de désirs inassouvis, et l'opacité du point de vue. De plus, il y a nécessairement un héros et un complot. On peut identifier tous ces éléments chez Oates. Cependant, il y a un problème en ce qui concerne la résolution des histoires. Palmer maintient que le roman noir doit nous permettre d'interpréter le monde en fournissant une résolution fictive aux problèmes soulevés, mais au lieu de montrer que les complots perturbent périodiquement la nature ordonnée du monde, les œuvres d'Oates dépeignent un monde désordonné et confus par nature.

Symons préfère le libellé « crime novel » (roman criminel) au « roman policier ». Il remarque que toutes les histoires du genre sont construites autour de l'histoire d'un crime, la différence se trouve dans le point de vue qu'elles adoptent sur celui-ci. Symons parle d'une forme hybride, d'une littérature à sensation, c'est-à-dire une littérature qui traite des fins violentes de manière sensationnelle. Ceci est assurément une caractéristique que l'on trouve chez Oates. Néanmoins, Symons croit que l'histoire contemporaine du crime peut nous apprendre comment vivre paisiblement dans notre monde, ce qui ne coïncide pas avec la vision post-humaniste relevée dans le corpus.

Pour clore le chapitre, j'examine de plus près la place de la violence chez Oates. Dans sa fiction, la violence ne peut pas être séparée des questions relatives à l'identité et ces deux thèmes sont liés par sa vision grotesque du monde. Ses personnages peuvent être considérés comme des « freaks » atteints d'une maladie de l'âme qui génère un sentiment de répulsion chez le lecteur non pas en vertu de leur aspect physique mais en raison de la nature de leurs choix. La présence du grotesque complique les histoires et contribue à révéler les limites des romans policiers.

Chapitre 11

C'est la nature ouverte des textes d'Oates qui pose le plus de problèmes lorsqu'on essaie de les définir comme des romans policiers. Ce dernier chapitre analyse les intentions de l'auteure lorsqu'elle manipule les codes du genre selon les procédés recensés dans les chapitres précédents. Je développe d'abord le concept de parodie avant de l'appliquer aux textes d'Oates.

Dans une première section je m'appuie sur l'analyse de Benoît Tadié qui montre que la parodie est inhérente à l'évolution du genre. Le roman noir est en effet une parodie du langage et des conventions du roman à énigme. Ceci m'amène à suggérer qu'Oates modifie, ou parodie, le roman policier pour l'adapter à son propre langage.

Une théorie de la parodie est donc le sujet de la deuxième section. J'utilise la définition de Margaret Rose pour qui la parodie équivaut à « la réécriture comique du matériel linguistique ou artistique déjà formé » (« the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material ») (Rose 52). Avant de voir dans quelle mesure les œuvres du corpus peuvent être lues comme des parodies, j'applique la théorie de Rose à un autre roman d'Oates,

Mysteries of Winterthurn (*Mystères de Winterthurn*) qui est manifestement une parodie de roman policier. Ensuite, j'examine si le même processus se manifeste dans le corpus. Mon analyse m'amène à dire que l'élément principal parodié par Oates est celui du héro isolé. Les juxtapositions de points de vue montrent que ses détectives sont enchevêtrés dans la toile de la vie au lieu d'être isolés dans un monde à part. On retrouve une divergence comique dans le fait que le lecteur peut identifier des éléments du roman policier qui sont employés au sein d'une structure discursive inattendue.

Ensuite, j'examine la relation entre l'écriture d'Oates et celle d'Edgar Allan Poe. Selon Henri Justin, Poe avait une conception plastique du genre et il a pu simultanément écrire la première histoire policière et la première parodie du genre policier. L'aspect parodique de « Double Assassinat dans la rue Morgue » de Poe, comme l'explique Uri Eisenzweig, vient surtout du fait que le « coupable » est une « non-identité ». Le problème d'identité culturelle est également mis en avant dans les textes d'Oates.

Enfin, dans la dernière section je me tourne vers des théories récentes du genre qui mettent l'accent sur sa malléabilité. De ce point de vue, les romans hybrides et parodiques d'Oates correspondent tout à fait à la conception du genre policier. On y trouve un même type de roman policier que l'on appelle métaphysique qui parodie le roman policier traditionnel afin de poser des questions sur la nature de la vie humaine. Cette définition semble bien correspondre aux œuvres d'Oates. Cependant, ses romans ne comportent pas l'aspect méta textuel des histoires de ce type.

Conclusion

Mon étude montre que le mystère imprègne tous les aspects des textes du corpus. Il est le concept structurant. La réécriture d'Oates transforme le roman policier. Il ne peut plus rétablir un *statu quo* comme le roman à énigme le faisait autrefois. Il ne peut pas non plus soutenir une norme morale absolue comme le roman noir. Les éléments du policier sont plutôt utilisés pour rendre compte de la nature défectueuse de l'humanité et la finalité de l'histoire policière est dissoute dans une atmosphère de mystère généralisé, d'émotions confuses et de réponses contradictoires. Oates réécrit donc le roman policier pour le faire correspondre à sa vision énigmatique du monde. Elle lui donne une dimension plus humaine plus en harmonie avec les attentes des lecteurs contemporains.

Ma conclusion générale inclut une discussion sur les deux romans les plus récents d'Oates, *A Fair Maiden* and *Little Bird of Heaven*. Mes lectures montrent que les thèmes développés dans cette thèse sont encore présents dans la fiction de l'auteure.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Joyce Carol Oates:

B *Beasts*

FM *A Fair Maiden*

FS *The Female of the Species*

HOS *Heat and Other Stories*

HTG *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*

JJCO *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates*

LBH *Little Bird of Heaven*

MW *Mysteries of Winterthurn*

NG *By the North Gate*

NS *Night-Side*

PA *The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews*

RLS *Rape: A Love Story*

TF *The Falls*

TTG *The Tattooed Girl*

WAYG *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Selected Early Stories*

Works by Other Authors:

JP *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* by Jerry Palmer

JS *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* by Julian Symons

TT "Typology of Detective Fiction" by Tzvetan Todorov

INTRODUCTION

0.1 Overview of Critical Assessment of Oates's Work

In 1975, only twelve years after her first collection of short stories, *By the North Gate*,[3] was published, Robert H. Fossum speculated in his "Only Control: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates" that "Oates may be the finest American novelist, man or woman, since Faulkner and surely the best to appear in the past decade." Already, when Oates had a meager "six novels, four collections of stories, three volumes of poetry, and a book of critical essays" to her name, Fossum referred to her as "the most prolific" author, a label that continues to be applied to her. In this early comprehensive look at Oates's novels, Fossum thematically links the first five of them – *With Shuddering Fall* (1963), *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969) and *Wonderland* (1971) – through the issue of control. The characters, most of whom possess a total belief in self-determination, ultimately destroy themselves or put themselves at risk by attempting complete domination of both their lives and the lives of those around them. Though Oates's writing has evolved since Fossum wrote this introduction, the themes he identifies have continued to be relevant throughout her career: 1) states of bewilderment are inevitable for characters who do not know themselves, 2) an exclusive insistence on self-determination can only lead to disaster, 3) violence is a legitimate response to dual contrasting urges, and 4) the emotional chaos of the characters is mirrored in the formal patterns of the novels.

0.1.1 Oates Criticism: The First Wave (1978-1980)

Though various critical articles were, of course, published previously, full-length volumes on Oates and her works began appearing in the late 1970s, nearly twenty years after her first published story. Oates's first short story collection, *By The North Gate*, had been published in 1963, and her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*, the following year. By 1978,

[3] Joyce Carol Oates, *By The North Gate* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1963).

when Mary Kathryn Grant's study was published, Oates had published nine novels or novellas, eleven short story collections, four poetry collections, one play, three non-fiction volumes and one short fiction anthology. Now, more than thirty years later, the numbers have all risen dramatically. The current list[4] comprises fifty-seven novels or novellas (including those published under pseudonyms), thirty-two short story collections, eight drama collections, eight poetry collections, thirteen non-fiction volumes, five volumes of young-adult fiction, three children's books and eighteen anthologies. This is not to mention, of course, the large number of uncollected stories, essays and reviews that have been published in various periodicals, collections and anthologies. Assessing this vast and varied oeuvre is no easy task for critics and has only just begun. Numerous critical articles and scholarly volumes have already been published, but when compared to the extent of Oates's oeuvre, it becomes clear there must be far more to say. Oates criticism currently consists of twenty-seven books about the author and her works. Eleven of these are studies predominantly or exclusively of the novels, seven are devoted to the short stories, four are collected critical essays, two are collections of interviews, one an annotated bibliography, one a biography and one the author's edited journals. There exist, as well, numerous uncollected reviews and critical essays, many of which will be cited throughout this dissertation. However, for reasons of expediency, the following critical overview will concentrate primarily on the book-length studies of the novels which encompass the wide range of Oates criticism while focusing on objective scholarly assessment.

Four full-length volumes on Oates were published between 1978 and 1980. Essentially studies of the novels, they look to the author's non-fiction to shore up a vision of her artistic aesthetic and occasionally also reference short stories and poems. Mary Kathryn Grant's 1978

[4] As of August 2010.

The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates[5] explores the oeuvre through an analysis of its violent and destructive thematic elements. Joanne V. Creighton's 1979 *Joyce Carol Oates*,[6] a study of the first eight novels and first three short story collections, focuses on the author's visionary aesthetic. G. F. Waller's 1979 *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates*,[7] a study of the first eight novels, highlights the affinities between the fictions of Oates and D. H. Lawrence. Finally, Ellen G. Friedman's 1980 volume on Joyce Carol Oates[8] takes a look at the first nine novels (through *Son of the Morning*, 1978) and the ways in which they both correspond to and differ from "an American Hymn." These first four volumes, which I am calling the first wave of Oates criticism, were each written separately, and therefore the authors do not build off of or react to one another's theories. However, together they formulate a general consensus about the themes, forms and structures, and artistic aesthetic of Oates's work. Reacting to certain criticisms about Oates's prolificity and frequent use of violence, they each seek through their research to establish Oates as a serious literary writer whose work should neither be belittled nor taken for granted.

Grant's study of Oates's first six novels up to *Do With Me What You Will* (1973) explores Oates's oeuvre through its violent and destructive thematic elements, attributing the presence of violence to the author's "awareness of the human condition."[9] Three recurring themes – woman, city, and community – are read as revolving around the central notion of communication breakdown, the concept she places at the heart of Oates's aesthetic.[10] Grant finds a coherence in Oates's oeuvre by focusing on what she identifies as the author's "tragic

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[5] Mary Kathryn Grant, *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1978).
[6] Joanne V. Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* (Boston: Twayne, 1979).
[7] G. F. Waller, *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).
[8] Ellen G. Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980).
[9] Grant 8.
[10] Grant 15. Grant elaborates on the relationship between violence and communication breakdown in Oates's work: "Continuously, her fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence: a sense of personal impotence. 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 satisfying relationships with other persons" (32).

vision," claiming that "she seeks through her works to awaken contemporary society to its own destruction, to deepen the consciousness of her readers to the tragic dimensions of life."[11] Though she refrains from offering a definition of tragedy, indeed, she claims this is an impossible task, she clearly identifies Oates's form of tragedy as emanating from the comprehension gap between her characters and the larger world in which they exist. "Tragedy, for Joyce Carol Oates," writes Grant, "is in part an expression of the failure to answer the inexorable need to create community." This failure is what is most often depicted in Oates's stories. However, to properly understand the artistic vision espoused in Oates's work, Grant makes it clear that one must read between the lines for the opposite vision of that which is recounted on the page so that "if tragedy grows out of the failure to establish community, it must necessarily touch on the fundamental urge of men to become related to one another through the bonds of community."[12] It is this hopeful alternative that is the real aesthetic vision to be associated with the author.

Though Oates's style has changed significantly over the years, Grant's emphasis on the tragic bent of the early work continues to bear relevance. Oates has consistently reaffirmed her interest in tragedy, which, for her, is intimately linked to violence. In a recent interview, Oates responds to the question "Why do you find violence so alluring as a literary subject?" in the following way: "If you're going to spend the next year of your life writing, you would probably rather write 'Moby Dick' than a little household mystery with cat detectives. I consider tragedy the highest form of art."[13] Another recent interview, with Chauncey Mabe, also broaches the subject: "'Most serious work has a tragic turn,' she says. 'You can't have serious literature without confronting evil, and also how people deal with it. I

[11] Grant 117.
[12] Grant 131.
[13] Deborah Solomon, "Questions for Joyce Carol Oates: A Woman's Work," *The New York Times* (12 April 2009): MM12.

write about the consequences of violence, especially against women and children, and the focus is on dealing with the trauma.'"[14]

Joanne V. Creighton also presents violence in Oates's work as intimately linked to a realistic depiction of modern society and identifies the quest for selfhood and meaning as a primary theme. However, the focus of her study is more on Oates's particular visionary conception of human experience, as outlined in her critical writing, and it is in this context that the problematic use of violence is analyzed. Oates's interest in the quest for selfhood and the changing nature of personality, explains Creighton, is set in the context of a monistic philosophy, or self-ascribed "higher humanism," meaning "she sees man and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness, the past and the present, the writer and his culture as all part of a single totality."[15] The result of such a philosophy is a fictional world in which violence is no less legitimate a reaction than love, although "the idea of liberation through violence" can be hard for many readers to accept.[16] The major themes and motifs of Oates's fiction identified by Creighton include: 1) the irretrievability of the past, the loss of moral innocence, and the elusivity of understanding experience; 2) the influence of the family on the psychological development of children; 3) violence between men and women as a result of limited selfhood, and the possibility of liberation through love.[17]

Creighton criticizes Oates, however, for a discrepancy she sees between the author's vision and reader response.[18] She presents Oates's visionary aesthetic as unique and laudable

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[14] Chauncey Mabe, "Prolific Joyce Carol Oates strugges to write through a year of loss," *South Florida Sun-Sentinal.com* (15 March 2009).

[15] Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 22, 21. Laney Bartlett, one of Oates's protagonists in *Childwold* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1976), experiences a similar vision while trying to come to terms with the fact of her menstruation: "It's lovey, it won't hurt, nothing willhurt for long, it's what you must accept, it's normal, it's beautiful, it's alive, it's living, you don't own your body, you don't own the creek, you can't control it, you mustn't try you must float with the current, the plunge of the rapids, you must close your eyes and move with it, everything is spilling toward you, around you, inside you, through you, your blood flows with it, you are rivers and streams and creeks, there is a heartbeat inside you, around you –" (196).

[16] Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 145.

[17] Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 27, 48, 74.

[18] Oates herself has claimed not to preoccupy herself with the way in which a work will be received. In a 1993 interview with Shirley Jordan (*Broken Silences: Interviews with Black and White Women Writers*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), Oates responds to the question "What is the responsibility of

though she criticizes the fictional form in which it is presented. The visionary aesthetic outlined in Oates's essays and critical writing, she complains, is indeed present in her fiction though not easily comprehensible to the unsuspecting reader due to "an odd coupling of a modernist conception of character with traditionalist form." [19] However, Creighton's condemnation of Oates's fictional style is unique among early wave critics. She is alone in thinking that any incomprehension is the fault of the author rather than a failing on the part of the reader. Waller takes a much more favorable view of Oates's use of form, a point of view echoed by Linda Wagner in her introduction to *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, also published in 1979.[20] Both Wagner and Waller describe a versatile author whose work has evolved stylistically over time while remaining relatively consistent in terms of thematic content. They both also emphasize the importance of the emotive aspect in Oates's work, noting the absence of authorly judgment in an artistic project which "attempts to dramatize the mystery of the human spirit struggling amongst our personal and shared nightmares."[21]

Wagner writes of Oates's "personal movement from the ostensibly objective and factual to the strange, mysterious, fantastic – or, at least, inexplicable."[22] This coincides with Waller's view that Oates's early "realistic" fiction evolved gradually to encompass "a much wider range of formal techniques," "a significant increase in fictional sophistication" which manifests itself in fiction that is increasingly "formally open-ended and elusive."[23] Rather than bemoan the stylistic variety from one work to another, Wagner and Waller praise it, seeing in it a successful attempt by the author to choose a form that fits the material of each

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the reader, if any, in the creative process?" in the following way: "This is an interesting theoretical question, but, for the most part, I doubt that any writer considers it. My focus is upon the 'integrity of the work' – my hope of realizing certain material, and by way of this material certain characters and visions, as fully as possible. This draws my attention, and is often exhausting. To think of the reader and his/her responsibility would be unprofitably distracting" (157).

[19] Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 143-144.

[20] Linda M. Wagner, ed., *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979).

[21] Waller 3-4.

[22] Wagner xix-xx.

[23] Waller 84-85, 71.

individual story in a fictional project which "continues to show patterns and oddities of contemporary life."[24]

Though he references certain short stories, speculating it is here that the author's best work is perhaps to be found, the main body of Waller's study centers on Oates's first eight novels[25] because "it is with her novels that her reputation and importance must rest. It is there that her prophetic urgency, the obsessive desire to 'dream America,' emerges at its most tantalizing, frustrating, and evocative."[26] Already, the sheer volume of Oates's oeuvre was playing a part in the choice of corpus. Waller insists on the emotional experience of reading an Oates text. He, too, points out the importance of patterns of self-discovery in the novels, while insisting on their evocation within "a distinctively felt atmosphere" of "emotional extremism" reinforced by imagery of "imprisonment, shattering glass, bursting and breaking" and explosions. Thus Waller links the violence in Oates's works to the central process of a "character's growth to self-awareness."[27] Violence, quests for meaning and selfhood, and flux are all, therefore, intimately linked and related to Oates's interest in the idea of different ontological realities. "Her most recurrent evocatory technique," he explains, "involves the sudden eruption of fearful or unexpected events through apparently realistic surfaces."[28] Waller considers that "fascination with flux, with art as prophecy, with the therapeutic exposure of the self" are central motifs to both Oates and Lawrence and connects them as well

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[24] Wagner xxii.

[25] One novella, *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey* (1976), was also published during this time. Oates's reaction to the finished version of this work is unusual: ". . . it occcurred to me midway into the novel that it was the most disgusting thing I've ever read, and yet I wrote it myself; I wrote it" (*JJCO* 147). And a few pages later: "Received harcover of *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey*. Beautifully designed & bound. I don't know quite what to think of the novella . . . whether it's inspired or simply awful . . . outrageous . . . a little crazy. I don't think I would care to meet the author" (*JJCO* 160).

[26] Waller 3.

[27] Waller 10.

[28] Waller 27.

through "their fascination with sexuality."[29] He considers that "both writers link sexuality with the Nietzschean vision of the self struggling to overcome itself."[30]

Finally, Ellen G. Friedman's 1980 volume completes the first wave, taking a look at the first nine novels (through *Son of the Morning*, 1978) and the ways in which they both correspond to and differ from "an American Hymn." Friedman places the first five novels, from *With Shuddering Fall* to *Wonderland*, in the category of "early novels" for what she considers to be their dependence on plot and their reliance on traditional modes. The four novels from *Do With Me What You Will* to *Son of the Morning* thus fall under the label "later novels." In this group, "Oates masterfully integrates form and content," writes Friedman, making these novels "less immediately penetrable by the reader than the vivid, forceful event-filled early novels" yet providing "a richer texture for the reflective reader to contemplate."[31] Friedman insists that "in Oates's fiction, the individual is always viewed in the perspective of the larger world."[32] For this reason, the work is intimately tied to a cultural context. A recurring theme in Oates's fiction revolves around the notion of limits: both "the hunger to overcome human limitation," which Friedman identifies as "Oates's abiding theme,"[33] as well as the necessity to accept certain limits. Thus, as there is "no separation or redemption" from this "universe that [man] can neither transcend nor control," "her fiction documents the necessity for compromise, reconciliation, association, and reciprocity."[34] Though she acknowledges that Oates's fiction "does alarm and repel," Friedman ultimately grants legitimacy to the violence it contains because it is an integral part of the description of "an oppressive and insistent rhythm of American life."[35] She claims that "the dominant impressions" one takes away from Oates's work "are of its unity," though this unified vision

[29] Waller 13, 17.
[30] Waller 20.
[31] Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* 189.
[32] Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* 3.
[33] Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* 196.
[34] Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* 187, 20.
[35] Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* 8.

is also a progressing one: "The movement in Oates's art is from raw, powerful, cataclysm-packed novels to subtler, more complex, self-conscious vehicles; from a dependence on plot to a dependence on form."[36]

Taken together, the studies making up this first wave of criticism present a consensus about certain thematic elements of Oates's work. They are divided on the merit of Oates's use of form. However, they nevertheless put up a united front against naïve and superficial criticism of Oates's prolificity and use of violence. Indeed, the justification of the use of violence is a central concern for each critic. Though Oates herself, as is evident in many of her journal entries, feels much removed from the young woman who wrote the first batch of novels treated in these studies,[37] there can be no doubt that certain constants exist, many of which are among those characteristics identified by the early critics. Certain of these will also be important in my study of Oates's later work, which is why I have devoted so much space to them in this introduction. Indeed, Oates's self-ascribed "psychological realism" is put to work in attempting to catalogue the "mysteries of life," an expression repeatedly used by critics and author alike. From the juxtaposition of these four unique critical views there emerges a consensus regarding the primacy of certain themes in Oates's fiction including the inherent mysteriousness of life, the quest for liberation of the self and the need to establish community. Violence has a legitimate place in her fiction not only because it is an integral part of American life but also because it is the inevitable result of the process of communication breakdown that she continually dramatizes. However, despite the pervasive presence of violence, Oates's vision is not generally considered a dark one. Rather, her melioristic vision reveals a glimmer of hope: "The America she evokes is violent, spiritually

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[36] Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* 188-189.

[37] This is a subject she broaches several times. The following excerpt is taken from the penultimate entry in her *Journal*: "Why do I write such stories? Do they illuminate my soul? Or someone else's? What is the origin (let alone the purpose, the destination) of art? Radiant pockets here and there, mysterious crevices. In a way I know less than I did at the age of twenty, writing the queer intransigent 'tales' of *By the North Gate*. And should I live to be sixty, why then . . . what kinship with <u>this</u> Joyce, fretting & revising hour upon hour to compose short fictions no one will much like . . . ?" (494).

destructive, and yet hopeful in its fragility; hers is a vision of openness as much as of despair."[38]

0.1.2 Second Wave of Oates Criticism: The Middle Years (1987-1998)

By 1987, a year that saw the publication of three more critical volumes – Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates*, Greg Johnson's *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* and Eileen Teper Bender's *Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence* –[39] Oates's fortunes had evolved significantly. *Bellefleur* (1980) had been a best-seller and her novels especially were being more widely read. Indeed, Bender could write in her afterword: "Clearly, Oates has become an imposing presence on the public scene, in the critical press and classroom, and in the interpretive community."[40] I will not discuss in depth the first two volumes on the above list. Bloom's volume is a collection of previously published essays and reviews. Johnson's work is part of a collection written for undergraduate students and nonacademic readers. Suffice it to say that Johnson's analysis largely parallels those outlined previously. He writes, for example, that Oates's "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."[41]

Eileen Teper Bender introduces Oates as a writer who "has emerged from an eccentric position as 'Dark Lady of American Letters' to become our principal artist-in-residence." She chooses to foreground this label as a way to emphasize the dense, multi-faceted nature of Oates's writing. Largely concerned in her fiction with the idea of self, Oates herself wears many hats, is composed, in a sense, of "opposing selves," explains Bender, including

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[38] Waller 59.
[39] Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987). Greg Johnson, *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987). Eileen Teper Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[40] Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates* 179.
[41] Johnson, *Understanding* 8.

"novelist, playwright, short story writer, essayist, editor, poet, publisher, teacher."[42] This very diversity, Bender argues, is what enables Oates to create a new, original fictional world that is nevertheless grounded in tradition. Through her study of the novels,[43] Bender attempts to show through intertextual readings that Oates's "work is necessarily wide-ranging and essentially revisionary, produced by a discursive process of immersion, reimagination, mediation, and synthesis."[44] Painting the picture of someone who is essentially a reader's writer, Bender claims that "Oates deliberately invokes influences" and cites, among others, "Milton, Yeats, Kafka, Carroll, Aeschylus, Jung, Dostoevski, Thoreau, Maslow, Mozart, James, Nabokov – a circle as large and varied as Oates's own interest in language and ideas."[45] Thus each Oates novel is essentially a rejuvenation of literary tradition, "successive experiments in narrative, readings which reimagine 'categories.'" From *A Garden of Earthly Delights, Expensive People* and *them*, which "reinvoke and rework the conventions of the realist, the existentialist/fabulator, and the naturalist," to *Childwold*, "an experiment in multiple voices, a parody of Nabokov's perverse voyeurism," and *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, "a rich feminist parody of the nineteenth-century conduct book," to cite just a few, "Oates has created fiction 'between the categories,' testing traditional genres not for their reliability but for their elasticity, searching for ways to represent a personality that is polymorphic, part civilized, part barbarous."[46] To emphasize what she views as Oates's perceptive view of a world in constant flux, comprised of ever-changing personalities, Bender insists, in her conclusion and afterword, on the author's tendency to rework even her own narratives, thereby resisting "all acts of closure."[47]

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[42] Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates* vii.
[43] Through the 1986 *Marya: A Life*, again, like Waller, excluding the 1976 novella *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey*.
[44] Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates* viii-ix.
[45] Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates* 6, 7.
[46] Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates* 7, 8, 9.
[47] Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates* 180.

In 1992, Joanne Creighton published *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years*,[48] a volume which picks up where her earlier work left off and covers the period 1977-1990. Her basic assessment that Oates's "central obsession is with the search for authentic individuality" remains unchanged.[49] However, she notes that the subject matter of the novels has shifted: "Whereas a number of Oates's early novels focus on male protagonists and their quests for liberation from intolerable constraints, often through violence, the novels of Oates's middle period portray a number of intelligent, gifted, sensitive young women, who are more identifiably like the author herself."[50] Creighton still sees a discrepancy between subject and form in the fiction and attributes contradictions in critical readings to Oates's "unique doubleness" and attraction to contraries. The very idea at the heart of her fiction is also that which makes it difficult to understand: "The paradoxical nature of the self – its simultaneous centrality and elusiveness – lies at the very heart of Oates's thought, complicating any simple view of her work and sometimes causing an ambiguity of affect for readers."[51]

In her 1993 *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction*, Marilyn C. Wesley chooses the term "domestic fiction" to express that Oates's fictions unfold in the central locus of the family unit. Wesley's study is above all an investigation into power relationships in the context of the family. "In a wide range of plots and settings," she explains, "mother-daughter, father-son, and brother-sister relationships consistently produce the narrative patterns" of refusal, "and the connections between mothers and sons and fathers and daughters [...] result in the provocative narratives" of transgression.[52] Whereas Creighton had remarked on an increasing interest in female protagonists, Wesley proposes a completely feminist reading of the texts. Indeed, her self-stated goal is "to theorize a basis for the well-

[48] Joanne V. Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).
[49] Creighton, *Middle Years* 118.
[50] Creighton, *Middle Years* 7.
[51] Creighton, *Middle Years* 110.
[52] Marilyn C. Wesley, *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1993) 10.

deserved feminist appreciation of Oates' valuable oeuvre."[53] Other critics have linked the underlying structure of the work to her personal philosophy concerning the mysteries of life and the quest for liberation of the self through an acceptance of a relationship with the communal "we" rather than obstinate perseverance of the individual "I". However, Wesley is not satisfied with what she considers to be the limited scope of this analysis and prefers to analyze Oates's work in terms of a larger feminist project. More so than previous critics, Wesley insists on the author's use of the family as a central framework for the unwinding of her plots and describes the oeuvre as "an extended meditation on the institution of the family as the 'locus' of the definition and dissemination of social and economic power through the gendered psychological experience of its members."[54] The refusal and transgression indicated in the title of the study are to be found in both the content and form of Oates's work. While her characters "refuse the models implied by the lives of same-sex parents" and engage in "transgressive relations" with parent-figures of the opposite sex, the forms chosen by the author are also transgressive in their experimental nature.[55]

Wesley develops the theories of the "feminist unconscious" and the "transgressive other" that she sees as proposing solutions in Oates's work to the so-frequently-depicted family crises. According to Wesley, the "feminist unconscious," which she defines as "the repository for those forms and practices of humanity presently unavailable to consciousness that predate and exceed gender restriction," is the means by which the writer is able to postulate the evolution of a new "global and enabling family" out of the current "local and limiting family." This new family would be composed of "the empowered daughter, the loving son, the powerful and protective father, the forceful and loving mother – members of a reformed human family."[56] The endings of later works such as *Marya: A Life* and *Bellefleur*

[53] Wesley, *Refusal* xi.
[54] Wesley, *Refusal* xii.
[55] Wesley, *Refusal* xiv.
[56] Wesley, *Refusal* 126.

posit the possibility of just such an ideal family, says Wesley. However, despite her claim that previous criticism did not delve deep enough in searching for global theories of the work, her theory of the "feminist unconscious" calls to mind Oates's notion of a communal consciousness frequently pointed out by critics. The second theory developed by Wesley is that of the "transgressive other" whose presence she discerns in almost all of the novels. This figure has a positive function, says Wesley, even when it pertains to a serial killer, because it is part of "a project of deviation – a struggle within the text against its own limits of consciousness."[57] This presence is an integral part of the dialectic of Oates's visionary project: "in addition to the dialectics *within* the text – the challenge of textual practice and the refusals and transgressions of family and gender codes – Oates' *oeuvre* may also be understood with respect to its dialectic *with* the text, its superimposition of a narrative leveled against the text itself to decenter the social codes upon which it is organized."[58] However, Wesley insists so much on the feminist nature of Oates's literary project that the theory seems contrived and one wonders whether her theory of Oates's feminist unconscious is a legitimate politicization of the oeuvre or purely a fabrication on the part of a pro-feminist scholar.

Brenda Daly's 1996 *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* also presents a feminist reading of the oeuvre, but with much more finesse. Her study covers nearly thirty years, through *Foxfire, Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993). Though Oates's fiction does not always present strong, independent female characters, Daly considers her overall vision to be a feminist one that poses itself in opposition to the patriarchal literary canon – through parody and experiments with literary conventions – and patriarchal conventions of society – by presenting traditional social hierarchies as unjust. Daly's title refers to Oates's plural conception of authorship and "the manner in which she divides herself

[57] Wesley, *Refusal* 146.
[58] Wesley, *Refusal* 145.

into the voices and texts in her novels."[59] Like Bender, she seeks to demonstrate "that between 1964 and 1994 Oates has created a number of different author-selves, each of whom functions as a means of resistance to novelistic conventions, as well as a response to social struggles taking place in the United States."[60] Daly discerns three distinct periods in Oates's fiction: the period of "anxious authorship" in the 1960s and early 1970s in which "Oates was struggling to leave the linguistic Law of the Father"; the period of "dialogic authorship" in the mid-1970s and early 1980s during which "Oates made a series of 'marriages' to literary and extraliterary fathers in order to commit 'infidelities' to their rule"; and the period of "communal authorship" in the 1980s and early 1990s in which she began to "create feminist communal narrators."[61]

Finally, Nancy Ann Watanabe's 1998 *Love Eclipsed: Joyce Carol Oates's Faustian Moral Vision* returns to an intertextual reading of Oates's fiction. Indeed, Oates's extensive knowledge of the Western literary tradition provides her a wide base from which to draw in the creation of her own forms. Watanabe identifies Oates as "an inheritor of a hybrid classical and romantic tradition in Anglo European literature, exemplified by Shakespeare, Pope, Rousseau, and Goethe," however, her historically oriented analysis also ties in "precursors in ancient Greek and Chinese literature and American literature from the colonial period through the twentieth century."[62] Oates's fiction, writes Watanabe, portrays "a timeless war between pagan and Christian forces."[63] Though her writing is ultimately moral, the morality espoused is not necessarily of the strict Christian variety preferred by many Americans. The title of the study, Watanabe explains, invokes her "impression that godly Christian love is eclipsed by

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[59] Brenda Daly, *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) 223.
[60] Daly, *Lavish* xi.
[61] Daly, *Lavish* xxiv.
[62] Nancy Ann Watanabe, *Love Eclipsed: Joyce Carol Oates's Faustian Moral Vision*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1998) xiii.
[63] Watanabe 34.

pagan and Faustian desire in the characters so realistically portrayed by Oates in her fiction."[64]

Whereas the first critical studies of Oates's novels looked largely at the author's themes in order to show the coherence of her aesthetic vision and justify her evocation of uncomfortable, unpopular subjects, the criticism of the late 1980s and 1990s is more interested in the form and effect of the fiction. The focus is on the experimental intertextuality of Oates's novels and the way in which her transgressive plots and forms work to criticize the patriarchal order and present an alternative, feminist vision of literature and society. This shift in critical outlook largely parallels the shifting interests of Oates's fiction which, from the late 70s/early 80s, was moving towards an increasing interest in female characters and was becoming more and more parodic and experimental in terms of form. Whether their focus be on an intertextual or a feminist reading, the authors of the five volumes discussed in this section, all of whom are women, insist on the unconventional nature of Oates's narratives. These narratives cannot be separated from the world in flux to which they belong. Thus, they continually resist acts of closure.

0.1.3 Oates Criticism in the Twenty-First Century

The most recent critical views continue to emphasize the experimental and hybrid nature of Oates's fiction and to highlight its value as social criticism. For Gavin Cologne-Brookes, who published *Dark Eyes on America* in 2005, Oates must be read in terms of American pragmatism and considered a pragmatist in her own right. In the pragmatic tradition of William James, Oates's work is "revisionist" in that it stresses "fallibility of dogma," the influence of society on the formation of the individual, pluralism and individuality. "In common with other pragmatists," explains Cologne-Brookes, "her overall vision is melioristic,

[64] Watanabe xiii.

stressing the importance of individual behavior as the only way to facilitate improvements in collective behavior."[65] Experimentation is an integral part of Oates's vision as, in true pragmatic fashion, "she believes that only through risk taking can consciousness evolve."[66] Also as a pragmatist, Oates is especially interested in dealing with contemporary social issues. Her fiction can therefore be read as illustrating a developing pragmatist vision, increasingly stressing and embodying the concept of adaptability. Thus, Oates's revisionary aesthetic applies as much to her revision of other writers as to her reworking of her own fiction. Cologne-Brookes separates Oates's career into two major periods – early work and mature work – divided by a short transitional period. He defines the early work as the period through the 1978 novel *Son of the Morning*. The transitional period during the 1980s includes *Bellefleur, A Bloodsmoor Romance,* and *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, ending with *Solstice*. This phase of blatant parody and experimentation with genre "also reveals a new consciousness of gender that helps us to align Oates with other feminist revisionists."[67] Finally, Oates's mature period begins in the late 1980s. She returns to many of the themes evoked in the early part of her career, however, she treats them in a different way. "These novels of her artistic maturity," writes Cologne-Brookes, "even while practicing the conventions of realism, both revise and renew them, presenting characters who likewise tend to reassess and renegotiate their life-purpose."[68]

Ellen G. Friedman has recently added to her earlier assessment of Oates's work. In a 2006 article entitled "Feminism, Masculinity, And Nation In Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction" she continues to promote the important role of Oates's fiction as a cultural mirror and achieves a certain amount of legitimacy in this claim thanks to the wider scope of inquiry made available by Oates's long career. Friedman chronicles an evolution in the treatment of masculine

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[65] Gavin Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) 5.
[66] Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes* 5-6.
[67] Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes* 15.
[68] Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes* 16.

characters, especially father figures, over the course of Oates's career and places them within the context of evolving cultural discussions of masculinity at their various epochs. Critics have claimed from the beginning that Oates's fiction is an accurate chronicle of a certain segment of American life, from which view it might be supposed that an evolution would be visible over time. Friedman's article adopts the task of verifying this hypothesis in regards to representations of masculinity in Oates's texts, showing how the relegation of fictional fathers to the periphery of narrative parallels the evolution of masculine cultural roles within society, leading her to the conclusion that "in that connection between world and text, in the legitimating and policing functions of fiction, Oates, the quintessential writer of American life, constructs characters who also speak to masculinized ideologies of nation to critique traditional American assumptions of singularity and the right to dominate."[69] Friedman's article effectively points to a new possibility within the study of Oates's fiction, notably the way in which evolutions in her fiction may reflect changing cultural norms. The purpose of the present study, though not quite so wide in scope, is related to this idea as my goal is to assess in what way Oates's use of classic mystery and detective forms might be read as cultural commentary. The relevance of such an inquiry is confirmed by Elaine Showalter's comment that "from the 1990s to the present, [Oates] has been writing with ever-more furious speed and intensity on varieties of American crime, from rape to child murder to serial killers, and their effects on families and communities."[70]

[69] Ellen G. Friedman, "Feminism, Masculinity, and Nation in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006) 492.
[70] Elaine Showalter, "The Female Frontier," *The Guardian Online* (9 May 2009).

0.2 Crime and Maturity

0.2.1 Choosing a Corpus

In the context of the major observations that have emerged from this critical overview of Oates's fiction, such as her innovative use of genre and form in conveying aspects of contemporary culture, I have found it interesting to consider Oates's use of the popular genre detective fiction, increasingly present in her later fiction, and the commentary it offers on our cultural desire to "know" and to "categorize." The following study picks up, in a sense, where Cologne-Brookes left off. I look at four crime-centered twenty-first century novels of maturity with a view to examining the repercussions of these texts when read both as hybrid rewritings and social criticism. Like the authors of the critical works I have surveyed, I have chosen to study Oates's novels because the wide scope of the form allows the author more space for the development of her ideas. In addition, this is virtually demanded by the desire to explore Oates's fiction from the point of view of detective fiction. Yes, detective fiction short stories have been written. Poe wrote them. Conan Doyle and Chandler wrote them. And they continue to be written. However, as detective fiction evolved from the classic puzzle story to the thriller, novels emerged as a favorite form because of the possibility they afford of developing the story of a crime and prolonging the mystery and suspense associated with it. Furthermore, though Oates is often praised for being a master of the short story, she considers the novel to be a superior form, favoring it, among other reasons, for the possibilities it offers in the area of character development as she explains in a journal entry:

> Short stories don't seem to absorb me as they once did. There's such a paucity of consciousness in a story, I mean such a paucity of my own involvement in it; one no sooner creates a living, breathing (sic) human being than one has finished with him. The divine form is the novel, which includes the entire world . . . which can bring about an alteration of consciousness in the author if all goes as it should. . . . (*JJCO* 171)

When speaking of an author whose personal artistic aesthetic of the inherent mysteriousness of life has been readily apparent in her fiction from the very beginning, it may seem incongruent to propose a study of her work in relation to detective fiction. Detective fiction, after all, is traditionally concerned with positing a final solution to a given puzzle. However, I will show that Oates, as she has done in the past with other forms, appropriates this one to her own ends, ultimately encouraging her readers once again to question the wisdom of rigid thought processes exemplified by genre rules and forcing us to accept the inherent mysteriousness of the world in which we live.

The initial goal of my research was not to examine Joyce Carol Oates's recent fiction from the point of view of detective fiction. Rather, I gradually observed, as I read more and more of Oates's work and as my own work progressed from a study of the feminist gothic to a study of parody and metafiction to an interest in the grotesque, that Oates's main body of novels was beginning to resemble detective fiction more and more. When this idea occurred to me, I set out to explore why certain works bring detective fiction to mind without exactly fitting the bill. From the beginning, both "mystery" and "searching" have been key concepts associated with Oates's oeuvre. Starting with the early wave of Oates criticism, scholars identified the quest for liberation of self and the mysteries of life as two of Oates's key zones of exploration. Gradually, these concepts have evolved from an originally abstract representation in her work to a more concrete place with her growing use of forms and structures from detective fiction. Certain detective fiction motifs have been increasingly present in Oates's recent works, however, this is not to say that this is an entirely new development. In fact, detective fiction plots can be identified throughout her career. Oates began experimenting with detective fiction as early as the 1980s. For example: *Angel of Light* (1981) tells of a sister and brother searching for evidence that their mother and her lover are responsible for their father's death; and *American Appetites* (1989) begins with a domestic

incident that leads to the accidental death of Glynnis McCullough and tells of the police investigation of her husband, Ian, and the subsequent judicial proceedings. In the late 1980s, Oates even began publishing thrillers under pseudonyms: Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly are her two thriller-writer personas. However, in recent years, Oates has become increasingly interested in what she calls the "mystery/suspense novel" and one can observe that a growing number of her novels are a peculiar sort of "*why*-dunnit."

Due to Oates's prolificacy it was imperative to limit this study to a few select novels illustrative of specific aesthetic principles and narrative devices adopted by Oates. As an exploration of varieties of American crime constitutes Oates's current fictional preoccupation, I decided to concentrate on twenty-first century works. Between 2000 and 2004, the year I started work on this study, Oates published nine novels and novellas (excluding those intended for an adolescent audience). Weeding out works published under pseudonyms[71] and those belonging to a trilogy dealing with the cult of celebrity,[72] I was left with five works: *Beasts*, *I'll Take You There*, *The Tattooed Girl*, *Rape: A Love Story* and *The Falls*. *I'll Take You There* was eliminated because it does not contain the crime component that the other four do although the discussion in the first two parts of this study certainly apply.

The Falls narrates roughly thirty years in the life of Ariah as she loses two husbands and tries to bring up her three children respectably. Exploring the family as the greatest place of mystery, it highlights incomprehension and miscommunication among family members. *The Tattooed Girl* tells the story of the improbable relationship between the wealthy writer Joshua Seigl and the downtrodden uneducated Alma Busch. The multiple viewpoint technique

[71] Brenda Daly, in "The Art of Democracy: Photography in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates/Rosamond Smith," argues for "the need to read Oates and Smith as separate authorial entities," explaining that "because Rosamond Smith writes in a different genre (or subgenre), her narrative techniques differ from those of Joyce Carol Oates." I decided to avoid the argument of similarities/differences between the works by preferring to focus on aspects of the genre discernable in Oates's "standard" literary fiction rather than the fiction she self-consciously writes in a different genre. Though it would certainly be very interesting to compare the difference between a Rosamond Smith thriller and a Joyce Carol Oates thriller like *The Tattooed Girl*, for example, this is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[72] *Broke Heart Blues* (1999), *Blonde* (2000) and *Middle Age: A Romance* (2001). Cologne-Brookes identifies these novels as a trilogy in his introduction to *Dark Eyes on America* (16-17).

foregrounds the phantasmagoria of the personality and the unexpected turn of events shows how submitting to one's unconscious impulses can lead to possibilities for change and redemption. The problematic nature of desire is accentuated in *Beasts* when Gillian learns too late that the relationship she longed for is not all she dreamed it would be. Finally, *Rape: A Love Story* explores both acts of love that can grow out of violent experiences and the harmful consequences of incommensurable acts compounded by an alienating system in which language inadequately serves the execution of justice. The characters in all of these works are constantly asking themselves questions about the nature of their existence as they struggle in their quests for self-liberation. However, each of these works also possesses a detective fiction/thriller plot or sub-plot.

The detecting plot in *The Falls* is connected with Ariah Burnaby's children's desire to learn about their father's past. They can sense that something has been kept from them. Sixteen years after her husband's death, Ariah believes the rumors that he committed suicide and has denied to ever talk about him with the children. The three siblings live dream-like existences until they begin to take an active role in discovering their lost origins. Chandler and Royall, now young adults, set out to make inquiries into their father's life and death. Royall feels that learning about his dad is the beginning of the serious part of his life. The evidence they gather, though inconclusive, indicates a strong possibility that their father was murdered and that a corrupt judge was in large part responsible for his untimely death, possibly even for ordering the hit. The youngest sibling, Juliet, for her part, unwittingly makes friends with a boy who eventually reveals to her that his father, a former policeman, was one of the men hired to perform the hit on Dirk Burnaby. Though the reader is privy to both of these plots, no information is given in the novel as to whether or not the brothers and sister share their respective findings. In addition, before the novel closes, we learn of the mysterious disapperance of the judge and Chandler's fear that his brother is responsible. However, this

aspect of the mystery is left open-ended along with the identities of the persons reponsible for Dirk Burnaby's death.

The Tattooed Girl is another example of characters whose actions are intimately linked to their physical origins. The crime, here, happens at the novel's close. Yet from the very beginning, the reader can sense the development of something sinister. Joshua Seigl's death seems inevitable, the mystery is how it will come about. The triangular relationship created by Dmitri Meatte (a manipulative part-time pimp and drug dealer), Alma Busch (the uneducated tattooed girl) and Joshua Seigl (the wealthy writer suffering from a neurodegenerative disease) seems to point to a conspiracy by the Jew-haters Dmitri and Alma against the fragile Joshua. Encouraged by Dmitri, Alma steals from her employer and performs actions intended to cause him physical harm, though none of her attempts prove fruitful. Alma's confusion about her own past and Seigl's family background is at the heart of her transgressive behavior. She is thought of as "the tattooed girl" because her body is covered with cobweb-like tattoos. She claims not to remember anything about the people who did this to her or their motives for doing so. Alma is lonely but cannot return home to her economically depressed mining town because her family has disowned her. Her relationship with Dmitri serves as a substitute; his abusive attitude towards her is familiar because it resembles the atmosphere in which she grew up. The problems in Alma's home town are blamed on the Jewish owners of the mines. As Seigl has a Jewish last name, Dmitri is able to easily kindle a hatred of him in Alma. Thanks to Alma's botched murder attempts, Joshua is eventually able to explain that he is not really Jewish because his mother was not a Jew. When he finally dies, it is of natural causes. He and Alma had become friends. The violent murder that occurs in the closing pages is of a completely different nature than what Oates had initially led us to believe. Joshua's mentally unstable sister is the culprit; she thinks Alma's sketchy history cannot possibly be synonyous with good intentions and is convinced she is reponsible for Seigl's death. The ending forces

the reader to reflect on whether or not "justice" is truly possible in a society in which people are systematically judged by the milieu from which they come.

Beasts is amateur detection of sorts embedded within a confession narrative. The first person narrator, Gillian, recounts events that took place twenty-five years previously which resulted in her committing an act of arson that caused two deaths. It is the unsuspected sight of a familiar totem in the Louvre that provokes this rush of emotional memories. During the period she thinks back to, Gillian is a student at a girls college. Two mysteries preoccupy her. Someone is randomly setting small fires around campus and there are rumors about certain students being involved with a poetry professor and his wife. Gillian "investigates" both of these questions. Both are situations of life and death. Gillian and her friends are afraid fire will be set to their residence during the night and several of her friends are driven to attempt suicide upon being rejected by the professor. Indeterminacy pervades the novella. Gillian is obsessed by this state of uncertainty, of not-knowing. The situation is complicated by her feelings for her parents, with whom she is estranged, and the mysterious origins of her obsession with her professor, an obsession so strong she cannot willfully control her impulses. Gillian's desire leads her into a submissive role in an abusive sexual relationship with her professor and his wife. However, Gillian will discover evidence of the couple's abuse of her and others and will take actions that put a stop to it for good. The campus fires remain unsolved though we wonder whether Gillian herself might not be responsible.

Rape: A Love Story is yet another tale of a triangular relationship, that of Teena Maguire, her daughter Bethie and police officer John Dromoor. On the 4th of July, while walking home through the park, Teena and Bethie are attacked by a group of local young men who gang rape and severely beat Teena and leave her to die in front of twelve-year-old Bethie cowering out of reach in a corner of a boat house. There is no mystery as to who committed the crime, Teena and Bethie can identify their assailants. The logical thing to do, then, once

Teena's body has healed, is to press charges and go to court. However, the legal proceedings fail Teena. At the preliminary hearing she is disrespected by the judge and accused of lying by the defense who advances the theory that the boys had consensual sex with Teena for money and that different boys beat her. Teena withdraws into herself and refuses to cooperate further with the prosecution. The rapists begin an intimidation campaign, cruising past the house, killing the cat and leaving threatening messages on the porch. Teena and Bethie are not only traumatized by their past experience, they continue to be afraid for their safety. The women appeal to John Dromoor who eliminates the four main defendants one by one, taking the lives of four criminals to give it back to their two victims. For Bethie, the traumatic experience clearly marks the frontier between childhood and adulthood. The notion of "justice" is scrutinized in this work but in a different way than *The Tattooed Girl*. Though John Dromoor is an official officer of the law who "knows" the answer to the crime, this is not enough to assure justice through legal means. This is not the only "truth" in the story that remains inaccessible. Answers for the victims are also inaccessible. Indeed, there does not seem to be any particular meaning behind the aggression, it simply happened. The "love" indicated in the novella's title is double. It refers to the responsibility Dromoor feels for the well-being of Teena and her daughter, a feeling that is linked with his conception of justice. It also refers to Bethie's infatuation with Dromoor who she understands is responsible for saving her mother's life.

"It is easy to see that no choice of examples is innocent. It is a somewhat arbitrary selection for which the chooser must take responsibility," remarks J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading*. "On the other hand," he continues, "there is no doing, in this region of the conduct of life, without examples."[73] Despite the justification I offer for the choice of my corpus, it remains clear that is as much a personal choice as anything, one that another person

[73] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 2.

would not necessarily have made. Even today, as a well-established woman of letters, Oates's writing is far from enjoying a consensus among literary critics. As recently as April 2010, a reviewer has complained about two of the works studied in this dissertation: "Oates's writing is compulsive and regularly masterful – there's a rushing, headlong quality to it; it has a raw energy, and her commitment to her characters keeps you engrossed. But sometimes, as with *Beasts* (2002) and *The Tattooed Girl* (2003), she gets the pacing wrong, allowing her narratives to move into a shrill kind of warp speed."[74] Though this comment is so vague as to be utterly unhelpful, I cite it simply as an example of the type of objections that are still frequently raised to Oates's work. The same reviewer adds: "She has a deep understanding of what lies beneath the surface: in any Oates work, strong or weak, there are always rewarding little epiphanies. But her unevenness makes people hesitate about her." Whether or not her style is consistently brilliant is for others to judge, in this study I am interested in exploring the ideas evoked by Oates's fiction on a larger scale than that of any one individual work.

0.2.2 Content Outline

This study is divided into three parts that each explore the notions of mystery and enigma from a different stance. Part One is comprised of four chapters that seek to situate the corpus works in terms of Oates's overall fictional project of exploring the mysteries of life. They show that the four novels are thematically linked to Oates's oeuvre in the way they explore the mystery of relationships, the phantasmagoria of personality, the problematic nature of desire and the necessity of coming to terms with incomprehensible aspects of life. Each chapter scrutinizes one of these overall themes in relation to one specific corpus work. In order to emphasize the universality of these themes in Oates's oeuvre, reference is made to other of her writings when appropriate, including non-fiction, stories and novels.

[74] Nadine O'Regan, Interview with Joyce Carol Oates, "Progress in work," *The Sunday Business Post online* (18 April 2010).

Whereas Part One concerns itself for the most part with the thematic mysteries of life evoked by the texts, in Part Two, the focus shifts to an examination of how these themes are emphasized by Oates's textual strategies. The randomness, irreconcilable juxtapositions and inability to order experience that are observed at the thematic level, are paralleled by the way in which the stories are transcribed onto the page. Oates transcribes the enigmatic nature of her characters' existences through the use of symbols such as dashes and points of suspension as well as the use of italics to indicate the different origin of a character's thought. She also plays with the chronological order of events to emphasize the mysteries of interconnectivity inherent in her characters' experiences. These textual devices contribute to the development of characters whose identities seem incomplete and ephemeral. They permanently occupy a liminal realm in which they are perpetually on the verge of coalescing as unified identities. These first two parts allow me to establish the inherently enigmatic nature of life that emanates from every level of Oates's fiction.

Finally, Part Three examines the extent to which these works can be considered detective fiction by discussing them in terms of several different critical theories of the genre including Tzvetan Todorov's typology, Jerry Palmer's understanding of crime fiction, Julian Symons's concept of sensational literature, and Benoît Tadié's reading of the thriller as parody. In addition, I explore the effects of detective fiction elements on the inherent mystery of Oates's fictional world. Detective fiction plots typically move towards resolutions. However, rather than provide answers to the persistent questions about the mysteries of life consistently raised by her characters, I will show that Oates's use of detective fiction paradoxically serves to structurally reinforce her thematic and textual enigmas.

PART ONE
THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE

Introduction: The Mystery of Human Emotions

From the very beginning of her professional writing career, with the publication of the short story "In the Old World" in *Mademoiselle* in 1959,[75] Joyce Carol Oates has been fascinated with the enigma of human life. This story was subsequently collected in her first book-length publication, the short story collection *By The North Gate* published in 1963. The page including the biographical blurb in the paperback Fawcett Crest edition[76] quotes Oates herself: "All of my writing is about the mystery of human emotions." Indeed, the Oates critic and biographer Greg Johnson claims that this first collection "investigates virtually all the important themes that characterize her dozens of subsequent books" and considers it "may be viewed as a microcosm of Joyce Carol Oates's entire career in fiction," scrutinizing, as it does, "with dogged thoroughness the moral conditions of an unstable American reality."[77]

"In the Old World"[78] dramatizes the halting, oblique confession made by Swan Walpole to a sheriff's deputy. Swan, it eventually emerges, is guilt-stricken for having wounded a negro boy's eye during a knife fight and intends to give his victim the opportunity to hurt him in the same way. The deputy considers this to be insane, saying "I wouldn't wonder you were gettin' sick, the way you act – might be comin' down with the heat-exhaustion fever . . ." (*NG* 162). Swan himself is at a loss to produce any sort of coherent explanation for his actions. In response to the deputy's question about why he has come, he claims not to know: "I don't know why I do anything. There ain't any reason. If there was a reason I would know about it, wouldn't I?" (*NG* 160). As Johnson explains, this story "dramatize[s] with particular clarity such issues as free will, human justice, and personal identity against the forbidding backdrop of a monolithic old world crumbling into a

[75] The story was selected as co-winner of the *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Competition and printed in the August 1959 issue.
[76] Joyce Carol Oates, *By the North Gate* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1963).
[77] Greg Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates's First Collection," *Studies in Short Fiction* 30.1 (Winter 1993): 1.
[78] Joyce Carol Oates, "In The Old World," *By the North Gate* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1963) 149-162. This collection hereafter abbreviated as *NG* for in-text citations.

fragmented new one."[79] From the beginning of the story, which opens upon Swan walking into town in the "early afternoon," it is clear that he is troubled. Though he is out in the sweltering midday heat, he several times refuses a ride, meditating on the discrepancy between his outer appearance and his inner turmoil, and ultimately the nature of his selfhood:

> How he would have to resist this, what strength it might demand to keep himself from groping backward for the door and stepping out onto the sidewalk, spent, relieved, quietly hysterical – not absolved of his sin or delivered of his punishment but simply in another dimension altogether, no longer related to it, to that which he would be able to think about later, idly; after a time it would probably no longer even be interesting, belonging only to another of his selves and never to the boy they would gaze upon and mold with their eyes, his father's son after all, only a boy come into town on a hot afternoon. (*NG* 151)

Swan enters the sheriff's office, but before responding to the deputy, he thinks about "how another boy might answer" (*NG* 151). The question of what precisely constitutes the self and the problems of the self in relation to the world around it – two central elements of Oates's aesthetics – are foregrounded in this story. In addition, several other characteristic features of her later prose are present. The protagonist's preoccupation with the hidden meaning behind events points to the problem of interpretation. The theme of dreams versus reality is raised here as well:

> Swan was gazing at the man. The deputy's voice came to him out of the dim and faintly heavy air of the room, warm, more than warm, in a manner that seemed to him familiar, as though this had all happened once before, or perhaps he had only dreamed it – but if he had dreamed it, it was much more carefully, with more detail than the manner in which it was really happening now; that was the way of all dreams. So he watched the man carefully, listening for his words; it was as though he believed they might really tell him what the man was thinking. (*NG* 156)

As Johnson has remarked, these narrative events "offer no genuine moral change"; we are merely once again presented with "the nightmarish conditions of the present."[80]

This preoccupation with metaphysical inquiry is not only present in Oates's fiction but manifests itself in her essay and journal writing as well. In her March 1975 afterword to *The*

[79] Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden" 8.
[80] Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden" 9.

Poisoned Kiss and Other Stories from the Portuguese, she addresses the problem of the self that will continue to dominate her thinking throughout her career: "Repeatedly, one is brought back to the paradox that one can experience the world only through the self – through the mind – but one cannot know, really, what the 'self' is."[81] Indeed, this subject is one of the principal fixations of her journal writing around the same time. The very first entry on January 1, 1973 gets right to the point: "Query: Does the individual exist?" (*JJCO* 2). Various comments scattered throughout the work indicate that the mystery of what constitutes the individual and how one perceives and understands the world outside oneself are never far from her mind.

Nearly twenty years later the author is still dwelling on this same idea, as demonstrated by the following passage in her "Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque": I take as the most profound mystery of our human experience the fact that, though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of self, this 'subjectivity' is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others. And the obverse – all *others* are, in the deepest sense, *strangers*.[82] Recent remarks made in a short article for *The Guardian* indicate that this subject is no less important to Oates today: "Recall that D. H. Lawrence warned us to trust the tale, not the teller – the teller of fictions is likely to be a liar. Darwinian evolutionary psychology suggests that none of us really knows what has made us what we are, still less why we behave so eccentrically as we do; when we are pressed to explain ourselves, we invent." Further down, she continues:

> To me, who has written for most of her adult life, in a number of genres and with wildly varying degrees of 'enjoyment' and/or 'misery', it's likely that writing is a conscious variant of a deep-motivated unconscious activity, like

[81] Joyce Carol Oates, Afterword, *The Poisoned Kiss and Other Stories from the Portuguese* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1975) 220. The unorthodox nature of the origins of this work poses other interesting questions of identity and relationships. Oates claims not to be the writer of these stories, but simply a sort of medium for a Portuguese "author" called "Fernandes" who communicated the stories to her in an odd sort of mystical experience beginning in November 1970. On page 219 of the afterword, she explains that "so far I have not been able to comprehend, to my own satisfaction, what really happened."

[82] Joyce Carol Oates, "Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque," *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (New York: Dutton, 1994) 303. Hereafter abbreviated at *HTG*.

> dreaming. Why do we dream? No one seems to really know, just as no one seems to really know why we crave stories, even or especially stories we know to be fiction.[83]

1.0.1. Author on an Interminable Quest

The first studies of Oates's work depicted an author obsessed with the problematic notion of the self and the inner life, constantly reworking her themes as if the key to transcendence and personal well-being lay in an understanding and acceptance of the enigmatic self/other dichotomy. This criticism was based on the artistic aesthetic evoked by Oates's published writing, for the most part her fiction and collections of critical essays. In 2007, an invaluable tool became available to Oates readers with the publication of her *Journal*. Though she claims the journal was not written to be read, even by herself, as a journal reader (she mentions reading the journals of Plath, Woolf and Cheever, among others) she was certainly aware of the tendency towards publication of noted individuals' journals and might have reasonably foreshadowed the same fate for her own. However, if we choose to give the author the benefit of the doubt, we can see in her *Journal* a faithful portrayal of certain facets of her unique self. The final paragraph of her preface, dated February 2007, asserts:

> The act of writing in a journal is the very antithesis of writing for others. The skeptic might object that the writer of a journal may be deliberately creating a journal-self, like a fictitious character, and while this might be true, for some, for a limited period of time, such a pose can't be sustained for very long, and certainly not for years. It might be argued that, like our fingerprints and voice 'prints,' our journal-selves are distinctly our own; try as we might, we can't elude them; the person one *is*, is evident in every line; not a syllable can be falsified. At times the journal-keeper might even speak in the second person, as if addressing an invisible "you" detached from the public self: the ever-vigilant, ever-scrutinizing "inner self" as distinct from the outer, social self. As our greatest American philosopher William James observed, we have as many public selves as there are people whom we know. But we have a single, singular, intractable, and perhaps undisguisable "inner self" most at home in secret places. (*JJCO* xiv)

[83] Joyce Carol Oates, "Writing for a living: a joy or a chore?" *The Guardian* (3 March 2009).

Only ten years of Oates's journals have been published. This is, however, a significant span of time. It is long enough, according to the author, that a part of her true self is revealed. If, indeed, "the person [Oates] is, is evident in every line," what person do the entries reveal? From January 1, 1973 to December 31, 1982 the journal presents the reflections of an individual who never stops wondering what precisely constitutes the self and marvelling at its phantasmagoria. A brief outline will be useful as the recurrent interrogations in the author's journal concurrently become regular motifs in her fiction for, as Cologne-Brookes explains, "Oates is a pragmatic idealist with a self-reliant, and self-creating, approach to existence. She consequently constructs her characters, and sees her readers, in the same light."[84]

In her frequent musings about the nature of individuality, it becomes clear that Oates believes not in the existence of one, complete, coherent self, but rather in the juxtaposition, within each individual, of multiple selves. Nowhere is this more evident than when she evokes her feelings about her personal and public lives. She expresses dissatisfaction at having to leave behind her private self, Joyce Smith, in order to publicly incarnate "Joyce Carol Oates," a sort of personality straightjacket which she describes at one point as a "restriction to a few cubic feet of consciousness" (*JJCO* 80).[85] This particular dichotomy so preoccupies her that she attempts to define these two different parts of herself: "The artist's essential nature – whether easy-going or difficult – should not have much to do with the art itself. 'Joyce Smith': the process of living with as much pleasure as possible. 'Joyce Carol Oates': the process that exists in and through and because of the books" (*JJCO* 94). Indeed, her writing, important as it is to her, is not all of her. And yet, she suggests later on that her writing is, paradoxically perhaps, the most real part of her: "Life is enchanting, certainly; people are enchanting. Yet when one thinks back over a period of time what is esssentially

[84] Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes* 6.
[85] The full quotation is slightly humorous and evokes an absurd sort of multiple personality disorder. Recently returned from a three-week road trip, Oates laments the anonymity and freedom of her personal travels: "No constant restriction to a few cubic feet of consciousness: Joyce Carol Oates. Now that I am back, I am fated to spend hours as a kind of secretary to that person, answering her mail, turning down requests politely."

real . . . ? I find that my mind moves on to the work I've done, the writing I've done, and that everything else is peripheral" (*JJCO* 202).[86] This might be considered firsthand evidence of the phantasmagoria of Oates's own personality. Her lamentation of the gap between her personal image of herself and the public image of "JCO" indicates her feeling of being misunderstood in the public sphere. She realizes, however, that "the secret of being a writer [is] not to expect others to value what you've done as you value it. Not to expect anyone else to perceive in it the emotions you have invested in it" (*JJCO* 130). Furthermore, when she expresses astonishment at her own prolificity – "This is really too much. When did I write all these things . . . ?" (*JJCO* 19) – it is as if "Oates-the-writer" existed completely cut off from the published authorial persona "JCO." She admonishes herself not to forget that her public persona is not her true self (*JJCO* 214).

Oates acknowledges there are aspects of her self, or selves, that elude comprehension, as when at one point she reflects on the nature of her writing production: "One cannot force oneself to write: and I haven't written a poem or a story for weeks. Nor do I miss this kind of writing. All my energies go into the novel, and there are none left over. *Is this conscious choice? No*" (*JJCO* 28, emphasis mine). Likewise, she often expresses alarm at things she has produced: "Who wrote it . . . ? I wrote it, am it, am infused with it. Yet it isn't me." (*JJCO* 255) Similarly, she accepts that there are aspects of the external world that will continue to remain unattainable: "Sense of envy, for lives or ways of life – living – inaccessible to me; but inaccessible, after all, because I have chosen my life and of necessity cannot choose another" (*JJCO* 30). Inversely, there are aspects of the inner self that cannot be communicated: "I will never be able to translate into fictional terms, into *Graywolf* and *Bellefleur*, all that I feel. All that I know. It simply eludes me, it's too intangible, too painfully subtle to be expressed in dramatic terms. There are some thoughts, then, that can only be private" (*JJCO*

[86] Underlining, rather than italics, has been retained for Oates's emphasis in her journal entries because this is the way it is presented in the published journal.

212).[87] As an author, Oates is all too aware of the limits of language – sometimes manifested in her work through allusions to Wittgenstein, which will be discussed later on. If something cannot be expressed in words, can it be assigned meaning? "But what does it mean? It doesn't 'mean' anything clearly, it can only be felt, experienced" (*JJCO* 274). Here, Oates provides a clue to the importance of the emotional realm in her fictional world.

Just as she allows for the possibility of multiple selves simultaneously co-existing, Oates also allows for the possibility of diverse chronological selves. She claims not to recognize herself in past journal entries, which prompts her to ask whether anything she writes ever represents her (*JJCO* 110). Likewise, upon several occasions she expresses surprise at being the author of various past pieces of fiction. Of *Son of the Morning*, she writes "an odd novel, not 'my' voice at all" (*JJCO* 143). Of *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey*, "it occurred to me midway into [reading] the novel that it was the most disgusting thing I've ever read, and yet I wrote it myself; I wrote it" (*JJCO* 147). Another symptom of personality in flux is related to the aleatory nature of memory: "How odd, how disquieting to realize that great blank patches obscure my memory . . . a map with enormous white masses. I seem to have lost the thread of my own life, my own past. And then a chunk of something is dislodged and floats to the surface" (*JJCO* 363). Reflections of this sort leave her frequently uncertain about just what exactly constitutes her "self": "What relationship does the 'myth' have with one's true self? Is there a true self? I feel, at times, so unutterably bewildered . . . ! It isn't simply that I do not know the first fact about my past life, I don't know the first, the crucial, fact about this present life" (*JJCO* 309-310). She also raises the question of the relationship between the intellectual, thinking subject and its physical incarnation – "Are we our bodies, or do we merely inhabit them?" (*JJCO* 89) – and wonders about the different levels of conscious and unconcious existence: "I seem to be detached from myself. What is

[87] *Graywolf* is a completed novel that Oates has decided not to publish. The manuscript is housed in the Joyce Carol Oates archives at the Syracuse University Library.

the self. . . . I suppose I am detached from my finite, personal self; I identify with another, deeper region of being" (*JJCO* 159).

Another frequent and connected realm of contemplation concerns the nature of how one comprehends the external world. "Very true it is (and who escapes it?)," she writes, "that we experience the world through the filter of our own personality, or, in the psychological terms of one school of psychology, we 'project' our own traits onto others, and rarely experience people as they are in themselves" (*JJCO* 34). Later, she insists more markedly on the existence of this gap, invoking the notion of mystery: "'Social life' a *mysterious* thing [*sic*]. One has an instinctive yearning for it, yet most of the time it is unsatisfying. Only friendship, only relationships over an extended period of time, have meaning. *Even then, so much of our lives are eclipses, secret, how can we know each other easily . . . ?*" (*JJCO* 53, emphasis mine). Reflecting on her fascination with piano and the way it has changed her life, Oates nevertheless recognizes that this change can be evident to neither her husband nor her friends: "How quietly, how placidly, how invisibly the truly significant events in our life take place. . . . Which is why we continually misjudge one another. Which is why we haven't a clue as to the inner (and most meaningful) nature of another person" (*JJCO* 235). Then again, there are things about us that others can understand, but we cannot: "I can't <u>experience</u> myself as others evidently do" (*JJCO* 407). Later, she returns to this idea, referring to it as the paradox of invisibility: "Invisibility. Visible to others; invisible to ourselves. Our paradox. What is indecipherable to us may be readily available to others, even to strangers" (*JJCO* 437). A sub-element of the self/other relationship that Oates thoroughly explores in her fiction through her frequent use of multiple viewpoints is the realization that for any event, there exist as many interpretations of it as individuals who experienced it: "Ray & I experience something together and then afterward while talking about it we discover that I interpreted it

one way, he another. A friend still another. And the universe opens up dizzyingly" (*JJCO* 113).

The evidence of Oates's observations suggests that one cannot completely know those others with whom one interacts. And yet, these relationships, however incomplete they may be, are essential: "a claim might well be made that the only valuable reality is with friends, with others, with relationships in which one's individuality is practically extinguished" (*JJCO* 38). Indeed, it is only through these relationships that the self's existence is legitimized, and Oates evokes the notion that we exist only through our interactions with others. A corollary to this is the legitimacy brought to the art work by another person.[88]

Whether Oates's reflections in her journal are occasionally contradictory, or her ideas changed over time, is beside the point. What I wish to emphasize through the above summary is the constant questioning about the nature of self, other and mystery that infuses Oates's journal entries. As I will show, many of the same themes are conjured up in her fictional worlds. Though it would be a glaring mistake to claim that Oates's fictional worlds mirror her own – she claims to lead a very normal, calm, happy, markedly non-violent life – the constant metaphysical musing described above does find a way into her fiction. In fact, in several respects – the way it skips frequently from one subject or anecdote to another and the space devoted to questioning and wondering – the *Journal* reads like certain passages of Oates's fiction with herself as primary protagonist. I will start this study with a discussion of the ways in which the corpus works are faithful to Joyce Carol Oates's continuing literary project of exploring the inherent mystery of life.

In a preface to *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, a parody of classic detective fiction which makes up part of her gothic triology, Oates writes that "the three cases that constitute

[88] See the quotation from page 175 of Oates's journal cited as an epigraph to my general introduction.

Mysteries of Winterthurn are variations on the enigma of mystery itself."[89] The same could in fact be said about the novels studied here. Before concluding with a discussion of the mysteries of the detective fiction plots in my corpus works, I will examine other manifestations of enigma. Hence, in my first part I will discuss the four novels as manifestations of the enigma of the mysteries of life. Indeed, these works can be read as variations on the confusing emotional consequences of family, personality, desire and justice. *The Falls* explores the institution of the family through the particularly striking example of the Burnabys and it slowly becomes clear why one Oates heroine (from the short story "You") has considered the family as the site of the deepest mystery. The phantasmagoria of personality is foregrounded in *The Tattooed Girl*, showing both how one individual may possess at once a variety of seemingly contradictory traits and how one's preferences and choices can evolve over time. *Beasts* highlights the absurdity of a life in which what we think we want is not always the answer to our heart's desire. Finally, *Rape: A Love Story* presents a snapshot of an alienating system in which language inadequately serves the execution of justice.

[89] Joyce Carol Oates, "Five Prefaces: 3. *Mysteries of Winterthurn*," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions And Opportunities* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988) 373.

Chapter I
The Falls: The Case of the Well-Meaning Family

In the story "You" from the collection *The Wheel of Love* one of the characters identifies the family as the locus of an inherent mystery: "The family is the deepest mystery, deeper than love or death."[90] Indeed, family relationships are some of the most opaque situations with which Oates's characters are faced. *The Falls*, a family saga, depicts, in each of its parts, characters asserting their selfhood against the expressed wishes of their families, or, failing to do so, suffering drastic consequences. The inertia of the family, no matter how well-intentioned, acts as a symbolical "deadline" for the individual self (in the original sense of the word, a "deadline" was a boundary a prisoner could not cross without being shot). One of the major questions that the text explores is whether or not transgressing the deadline is inevitable. In other words, is the individual will naturally superseded by that of the family unit as David Cooper suggests in his theory of the destructive power of the family?[91]

As Oates cautions in a 2007 interview with John Mullan,[92] Niagara Falls and its surrounding areas are meant to be understood equally as impressive, awe-inspiring physical realities, geographic places, and symbolic constructs. Geographically, the deadline is the point past which the Niagara River's current becomes so strong that anything in the water is inevitably pulled over The Falls.[93] Dirk Burnaby, Ariah's lawyer second husband whose mysterious death will be the cause of much anguish for his wife and three children, reflects:

> Where the river broke at Goat Island, the current became treacherous; two miles above The Falls, this area was known as the "Deadline."
> Once a boat moved into the Deadline, its occupants were doomed.
> Once a swimmer allowed himself to be swept into the Deadline, he was doomed.[94]

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[90] Joyce Carol Oates, "You," *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1970) 329.
[91] David Cooper, *Mort de la famille*, Trans. Ferial Drosso-Bellivier (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972) 8.
[92] John Mullan, *Guardian* book club interview with Joyce Carol Oates (14 August 2007).
[93] When referring to Niagara Falls as The Falls, Oates typically capitalizes both words.
[94] Joyce Carol Oates, *The Falls* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004) 95. Hereafter abbreviated as *TF*.

Symbolically, the deadline is a point of no return, and it is a subject of fascination for several of the characters: "*The Deadline*. Dirk drank scotch, and considered what this might mean" (*TF* 95). The implications of a character being pulled past a figurative deadline are, of course, that a wrong choice has started them down a path that can only lead to death. Thus, the metaphysical question posed by *The Falls* might be whether or not existence is ordered in such a way that we are each doomed to be pulled into a fall from which we cannot rise.

In a 2004 interview with Michael Krasny, Oates spoke of *The Falls* as a carefully calibrated family saga and environmental story in which the chronicle of the Burnaby family mimics of the evolutionary process. Indeed, many events in the life of the family can be compared to various processes of nature involving The Falls. I have already mentioned the deadline phenomenon. In addition, secrets disturb the calm waters of family life in parallel to radioactive industrial pollutants plaguing the lives of families in the Love Canal area. Similarly, as Chandler's science lesson reminds us, the family, like The Falls, is susceptible to the effects of erosion and time. In this way, the mysteries of family life are tied to the larger mysteries of nature and the various problems that arise in this fictional city of Niagara Falls are assimilated into the larger pure and natural processes of Nature. Thus, the poisonous toxins that disturb this pristine site and nefariously affect the health of a portion of the community also have an effect on the emotional stability of Oates's central family. "It was my sense that the environmental disaster, so long misrepresented by the polluting chemical companies," Oates explains, "had a deadly effect upon all who lived in its vicinity. There could be no 'happy' family, no untouched personal life, in the midst of such horror."[95]

[95] Michael Krasny, Interview with Joyce Carol Oates: Part 1, San Francisco (11 October 2004).

However, the citation from "A Niagara Falls Physician's Log 1879-1905"[96] that Oates offers as one of the novel's epigraphs reminds us that The Falls are initially presented as a unique geographical phenomenon exercising a mysterious power over the individual:

> *The Falls at Niagara* [...] *exert upon a proportion of the human population, perhaps as many as forty percent (of adults), an uncanny effect called the* hydracropsychic. *This morbid condition has been known to render even the will of the active, robust man in the prime of life temporarily invalid, as if under the spell of a malevolent hypnotist. Such a one, drawn to the turbulent rapids above The Falls, may stand for long minutes staring as if paralyzed.*
> *We may speculate: Under the spell of The Falls the hapless individual both ceases to exist and yet wills to become immortal.* (*TF* ix)

What happens to the self in the face of the spell-binding Falls? Is it possibile for the individual to be thus assimilated into his environment? The force of the "hydracropsychic" phenomenon described here urges these questions and more. This chapter will turn first to an examination of the self in regards to several of Oates's main characters before widening the field of investigation to encompass the family unit. Finally, the question of how Oates's characters perceive the world in terms of dream and reality will be explored.

1.1.1. Questing Self, Questioning Characters

Grappling with the questions "What constitutes the self?" and its corollary "Can I bear to live with the knowledge of myself?" is at the heart of *The Falls* from the onset. Gilbert's problematic appreciation of his identity stems from his inability to mold himself into the man his family and his society expect him to be. Other characters present equally interesting symptoms. Claudine Burnaby, for example, lives as a recluse in her beautiful island mansion because, having lost the beauty of her youth, she no longer knows who she is and feels she is now insignificant in others' eyes. The goal of the following section is not to list the different kinds of inquisitive remarks as I have done in reviewing Oates's journal entries, but rather to

[96] In interviews about *The Falls* Oates has acknowledged herself to be the author of this fictional epigraph.

examine the forms and consequences of the questing self on the lives of several key characters. To begin, Ariah's two husbands present us with examples of chronologically out of place characters for whom questing and questioning provoke largely negative consequences.

1.1.1.1. The Fossil-Seeker and the Tight-Rope Walker: Anachronistic Characters

Gilbert Erskine commits suicide by jumping into The Falls in chapter one. Chapter three, "The Fossil-Seeker," appropriately goes back in time to present Gilbert's thoughts as he hurries from the hotel. "Run for your life" is the refrain that carries Gilbert forward throughout the chapter and reminds us, paradoxically, that he is actually on his way to end his life. Two existential questions haunt Gilbert. One has to do with the nature of man's (and by inclusion his own) place in the universe, the other with his own sexuality. Both man of God and man of science, Gilbert has been unable to reconcile these two modes of existence and come to any definite conclusion about whether or not life has meaning and what his place in the universe should be. Attracted to fossils – "like mysterious artworks they were" (*TF* 29) – from a young age, Gilbert refuses to accept both the religious viewpoint "that the Devil had planted so-called fossils in the earth to mislead mankind" and the scientific premise of evolution (*TF* 30). As a result, he has no dogma to serve as his anchor, but lives in a constant state of confusion and denial:

> And yet: could it be true that ninety-nine percent of all species, flora and fauna, that have ever lived have become extinct, and that species are passing into extinction continuously? Daily? Why did God create so many creatures, only to let them fight frantically with one another for existence, and then to pass into oblivion? Would mankind disappear too, one day? *Was this God's plan?* (*TF* 30)

He is unable, or unwilling, to step back from the literal interpretation and read "the Book of Genesis as a Hebrew version of a Grimm's fairy tale" (*TF* 18).

As for the more intimate matter, though Gilbert does not refer to himself as a homosexual,[97] his reflections clearly point to such an interpretation. He acknowledges that his parents were desperate for him to marry for "possibly they worried about his manhood?" (*TF* 32). Consummating his marriage to Ariah is a grotesque, nightmarish experience for Gilbert – "Was this Ariah Littrell the minister's spinster daughter? [...] The bared gums, damp exposed teeth. A ragged swath of rust-colored hairs between her clutching thighs. She was ugly to him, repulsive" (*TF* 36) – and makes him feel that he has betrayed his friend D. whom he admits to loving: "*I can't love any woman, God help me I've tried. I can only love you*" (*TF* 29). Gilbert can neither find solutions to his problems, nor reconcile himself to living with them and so he can only think of releasing himself from misery. As he runs towards Terrapin Point, however, it becomes apparent that the spiritual part of his personality is already dead. It was effectively extinguished at the moment of his sexual relations with Ariah, the moment which epitomizes his betrayal of D. Indeed, even before he climbs over the railing and falls into the spray, he is described as no longer "in life": "In a gesture of which he'd never have been capable in life he seized his glasses and flung them into space" (*TF* 38). Gilbert's episode opens the novel with both a literal and a metaphorical fall to death. Lacking the courage to insist upon searching for a meaning to his existence, he has no other choice but to leave it behind.

Oates's fiction shows that the quest for meaning is fundamental because those who give up on the search, as in the above example of Gilbert Erskine, are doomed to acts of violence, whether directed towards themselves or others, whether physical or psychological, whether resulting in actual death or symbolic life-in-death states. In her introduction to *The Best American Mystery Stories 2005* Oates writes about the relationship between violence and meaning:

> There is no art in violence, only crude, cruel, raw, and irremediable harm, but there can be art in the strategies by which violence is endured, transcended, and

[97] During several interviews about *The Falls*, Oates has pointed out that such language was not used at this time among people of Gilbert's and Ariah's social milieu.

> transformed by survivors. Where there is no meaning, both death and life can seem pointless, but where meaning can be discovered, perhaps even violence can be redeemed, to a degree.[98]

Thus, Oates suggests that meaning can redeem past violence. However, she also suggests it has the potential to ward off future violence. This explains why the individual quest takes on such importance in Oates's work.

To the twenty-first century reader, Gilbert Erskine's personal tragedy seems to be that he was born too soon. In her essay "Beginnings" Oates evokes the notion that "our historical beginnings are utterly mysterious – why are we born? why when and as we are?"[99] Though debate still rages among evangelicals, of course, evolution is now commonly reconciled with Christianity. Likewise, homosexuality is finding a wider and wider acceptance, even in the institution of the church. Had Gilbert been born in the twenty-first century, he most likely would not have been fated to take his life at such a young age. Is it possible for one to be born at the wrong time? As if the soul had accidentally been delivered to the wrong body? The case of Dirk Burnaby and the Love Canal proceedings provide another example of this alienating phenomenon; the lawsuit that is doomed during his time becomes the inspiration for environmental lawsuits of the future. However, whereas Oates presents us with one coherent, though disturbed, character in Gilbert Erskine, Dirk Burnaby is present in the text for a longer period and through a succession of selves which, to the reader who sees him as a tragically misunderstood man, makes his death seem even more unbearable.

The single Dirk Burnaby of Part I is an intelligent, successful lawyer aware of his good fortune, generous with his friends and very successful with women. He is the grandson of a man who walked tightropes over The Falls in the 1860s and 70s, dying on his third crossing. Conscious of his ancestor's courage, the practical-minded Dirk asks "Yes, he'd been

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[98] Joyce Carol Oates, "Introduction," *The Best American Mystery Stories 2005*, eds. Joyce Carol Oates and Otto Penzler (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005) xiii.
[99] Joyce Carol Oates, "Beginnings," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions And Opportunities* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988) 4.

brave, but what's the point? Who wants to be a daredevil, and posthumous?" (*TF* 69). Dirk the lone romantic bachelor gives way to Dirk the husband: "Since falling in love with Ariah and marrying her he'd ceased to think of himself as a lone romantic figure crossing a tightrope" (*TF* 188). However, single life and married life is not the extent of the evolution. His married life is subsequently split into "before" and "after" his implication in the case that would eventually become known as "Love Canal." His sense of himself is profoundly altered by the experience. The Dirk Burnaby of after sees his friends become his enemies and his wife suspect him of having an affair. In spite of the fact that his actions were nobly inspired by abstract notions of justice, he loses his bearings, ending up adrift and alone, unable to prevent himself from being pulled beyond the deadline.

Oates's text raises the question of free will. After weeks of avoiding the woman in black and succeeding in discouraging her, he accidentally offers the woman and her daughter a ride during a June thunderstorm:

> He was too embarrassed to explain, and so he acquiesced to his fate. It would happen swiftly. Afterward he would recall how he'd had the opportunity to drop the woman off at the bus station downtown; he'd had the opportunity, at her house, simply to drop her off and decline her invitation to come inside. And having come inside, listening to her impassioned plea, he had the opportunity to tell her he'd consider her case, and retreat. All these opportunities he'd let pass in his zeal to do the right thing. (*TF* 197)

He had the opportunity, perhaps, but did he really have the choice? Is this the same thing?

Dirk made the mistake of believing that his altruism and knowledge of "the Truth" would be enough to win Nina Olshaker's lawsuit. When he realizes this is not the case, it is almost as if he deliberately sabotages himself by striking out at the bailiff, guaranteeing his disbarment. It is as if, like Gilbert before him, he cannot make a comprehensible equation out of the different parts of his life, and like Gilbert before his death he is described as no longer exactly "in life": "He'd become a specimen in a jar. He smelled of formaldehyde. Yet as a specimen he wasn't quite dead" (*TF* 268).

Tragically, Dirk seems to be at least partly aware of the fate awaiting him, reflecting at one point on the difference between real life and Hollywood films: In films, "there is an under-current [*sic*] of music signaling what emotion you are meant to feel. In what's called life, there is a continuous stream of time like the river rushing to The Falls, and beyond. No escape from that river" (*TF* 249). Thus, Ariah's two husbands are given parallel destinies, both coming to a psychological place where they are unable to reconcile their personal and public selves, a sort of mental deadline. Gilbert committed suicide by jumping into The Falls. Dirk, although claiming to live for his work while at the same time wanting to show his family that he loves them, takes the honorable, yet nevertheless autodestructive path with the result that he is murdered when his car is forced off the road into the river by a police cruiser. These conflicting impulses are communicated by the initial and final lines of the chapter entitled "11 June 1962" which relates the circumstances of the murder. The altruism of the opening line, "*Had to be, had to be. What choice?"* (*TF* 267), is countered by the sarcasm of the closing thought, "*Poor fool. Threw away your life, and for what?*" (*TF* 271).

1.1.1.2. The Green-Eyed Woman: Sheer Will Against the Pull of Time

Ariah and Dirk initially appear to be counterweights to the instability of such characters as Gilbert and the reclusive Claudine. They each initially appear as sane, well-rounded individuals. Ariah plays the role of the young, worried spouse, then, once her husband's body has resurfaced, takes her independence from her family and goes back to her life as a music teacher. Dirk, for his part, is lucid about his relationship with his overbearing mother.[100] He realizes that his privileged position is basically a question of luck and tries not

[100] Claudine Burnaby is a prime example of a Modern Gothic mother whose body represents the imprisoning structure originally embodied in the Gothic mansion. Though the issue of the Gothic is directly related to the issue of mystery and the family, I do not specifically develop it here. I have discussed this issue in my Masters thesis "The Feminist Gothic in Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur*." The current work generally assumes the Gothic nature of Oates's texts to be a given and prefers to devote space to complimentary issues rather than once again focusing on the Gothic nature of the texts' details.

to think of himself as anyone too special. Both are successful in their careers. In spite of their individual successes, the two find increased meaning for their lives once they fall in love. Yet, happy as they are, neither of them is spared the nagging reflections about life's meaning for long. Indeed, Oates does not seem to believe that eternal happiness is a reasonable aspiration. In response to the question "Do you think it's possible for humans to be happy?" in an interview about *The Falls* she responded in the negative: "Not deliriously happy – not for long. To be reasonably content for durations of time, seeing that life is an ongoing drama, should be enough!"[101]

Recently released from the hospital after the birth of her first child, Ariah asks her husband: "'I mean what has brought us, the three of us, to this place? And this moment? Out of all of the universe, and an infinity of time?'" to which he offers the response "Love," which prompts further musings on the nature of this ephemeral emotion: "Ariah continued, frowning, 'Love isn't less a force in life than gravity, is it? You can't see 'gravity' either.'" (*TF* 143) After Juliet's birth, Ariah reflects to Dirk that they are now "safe" because they have three children:

> He considered her words. "Now we're safe." What did this mean? Was this the basic principle of domestic life, of the terrible need to propagate one's kind? The human wish, as in a fairy tale, to live longer than one's lifetime, through one's children. To live longer than one is allotted, and to matter. To matter deeply, profoundly to someone.
>
> Not to be alone. To be spared the possibility of knowing oneself, in aloneness. (*TF* 188-189)

That Ariah should wonder about the nature of the self and its relation to the larger scheme of things seems particularly appropriate in this perceptive character who has the greatest number of "selves" in the novel. When we are first introduced to Ariah, it is the day after her first wedding and she is known as Mrs. Gilbert Erskine. "It was a role she was playing," Dirk reflects to himself upon two occasions (*TF* 74, 84), but one Ariah feels her

[101] "BookPage Interview September 2004: Meet Joyce Carol Oates" (25 August 2006).

marriage vows obligate her to perform correctly, carrying the vigil through to the very end and even insisting on identifying the "grotesquely bloated" body once the corpse has been recovered (*TF* 84). The idea that she is assuming a role is reinforced when, "eighteen days after the end of the vigil at The Falls" (*TF* 100), Dirk Burnaby drives to Troy to see Ariah. He addresses her as Mrs. Erskine, but she corrects him: "'Ariah Littrell' I call myself, again. I wasn't ever really that other.' *That other* was pronounced with an air of puzzled detachment, like a not entirely comprehensible foreign phrase" (*TF* 102). This example illustrates that the names used to define her varying social status are as mysterious to her as her place in the universe. Indeed, Walker Percy has identified naming as one of the most mysterious aspects of human existence. "When I name an unknown thing or hear the name from you," writes Percy in "The Mystery of Language," "a remarkable thing happens. In some sense or other, the thing is said to 'be' its name or symbol. [...] This is not only an unprecedented happening; it is also, as the semanticists have noted, scandalous. A is clearly not B."[102] In the above passage, Ariah is clearly reacting to the idea that one's being can be rapidly transformed by a simple act of naming.

However, naming also provides Ariah with a way to steady herself against the stormy seas. Ariah's response to the battery of outside forces which she cannot explain, understand or control is to close herself off in a well-defined role, creating a new appropriate one for each successive phase of her life, each role conveniently designated by the name society imposes on her as a married or single woman. As Richard Pindell has observed, "through naming the namer gains admittance to the going agreements about what is real that we call the truth, and the world begins to assume for him the recognizable features of a place."[103] "Mrs. Gilbert Erskine" is the strong widow who is able to maintain decorum when faced with the loss of a

[102] Walker Percy, "The Mystery of Language," *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) 155-156, 157.
[103] Richard Pindell, "Toward Home: Place, Language, and Death in *The Last Gentleman*," *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, ed. Panthea Reid Broughton (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) 54.

husband and the incessant hounding of the media. "Mrs. Dirk Burnaby" is the giddy newlywed who takes strength from her husband's love to defy the disapproval of both of their families. Finally, "Ariah Burnaby" is the protective mother who endures an economically challenging situation for her little family so that her children will not be tainted by knowledge of their father's death or by relationships with his family. For a short time in between her two married selves, Ariah returns to the identity she was born with, that of "Ariah Littrell." It might be tempting to consider this as Ariah's genuine self. However, the relative ease with which she cuts the ties with her family after their expression of disapproval at her second marriage seems to indicate that "Ariah Littrell," too, was simply a role, that of a minister's daughter, and one that she is equally happy to cast off once it no longer suits her.

This succession of names and identities raises the question of whether or not "Ariah" can be considered as a coherent personality. Certainly, all of these names refer to one unique individual with a unique DNA pattern. On the other hand, each name corresponds to a specific context and is even accompanied by different patterns of behavior. In "Pseudonymous Selves," Oates explores the desire of many writers to take on pseudonyms, musing that "it may be that, after a certain age, our instinct for anonymity is as powerful as that for identity; or, more precisely, for an erasure of the primary self in that another (hitherto undiscovered?) self may be released."[104] In a way, then, Oates offers her main character the luxury of different identities that she herself is not afforded, for, though she has tried on different occasions to supplant her social identity as an author with a pseudonymous identity, "fame's carapace" is such that the secret never lasts very long.[105]

As alluded to through the above exposition of some of her metaphysical speculations, Ariah's initial happiness at her new life with Dirk eventually gives way to an increasing

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[104] Joyce Carol Oates, "Pseudonymous Selves," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988) 385.

[105] Oates, "Pseudonymous Selves" 397. Oates uses the phrase "fame's carapace" in the final sentence of her essay. It indicates the social identity that the author quite understandably wishes to supplant.

uneasiness before evolving into the conviction that Dirk will one day leave her. Her husband's involvement in the Olshaker legal proceedings gives a concrete shape to Ariah's worst fear and she finds herself, once again, forced by circumstances into behavior that does not fit her sense of self, triggering the creation of a new self-image, that of a woman married to an unfaithful husband. She physically acts out this new role, but at the same time she mentally denies it. After receiving a phone call from one of Dirk's sisters informing her of her husband's supposed infidelity with a woman named Nina Olshaker, Ariah is virtually forced to go through his desk. While looking for evidence, she thinks: "*This is not the person I am. This is not Ariah*" (*TF* 217). When little Chandler comes to check on his mother's well-being, claiming he heard her crying and screaming "Ariah said hotly, 'You did not hear me scream, Chandler. Don't be ridiculous. *That wasn't me*'" (*TF* 218).

Faced with the confusion of the unimaginable that somehow finds a way to take shape, Ariah's response is not to give in but to hunker down in a protected area and brace for a fight. Defied by a husband who no longer appears to be on her and his children's side, Ariah seeks to control what she can, notably her children's lives, as illustrated by her attempted correction of Chandler's memory in the above example. This control impulse begins with a virulent reshaping of one child's memories and brings her eventually to limit all of her children's access to knowledge about the past. Ironically, in so doing Ariah herself becomes an overbearing gothic mother[106] like Claudine Burnaby whom she despises. As Sanford Pinsker points out in his reading of *Wonderland*, another of Oates's family chronicles that also dramatizes a succession of selves (and names) in its main character, Jesse, "children struggle

[106] Ariah convinces herself that she is acting in her children's best interests when she is in fact succumbing to her own narcissistic tendencies. As a result, where she had hoped to do good, she inadvertently ended up trapping her children within the confines of a mentally harmful parent/child relationship. Thus, the Gothic force that Ariah represents is one of the prime components of the mystery present throughout the text. The effects of Ariah's choices on her children will be returned to later on.

to escape the brutalizing pressure of their parents, only to wield much the same crushing power a generation later."[107]

Whereas Dirk considers himself like one of "those early, doomed explorers, who'd paddled their canoes along the wide river linking two gigantic lakes, not realizing until it was too late that the current was accelerating rapidly, and that they'd entered the 'Deadline'" (*TF* 219) and appears to acquiesce to his fate, his wife instinctively reacts to her husband's "going outside the family" by fighting the pull of time through the imposition of control mechanisms. She is determined not to lose her hold on her children. Ariah's full response as the widowed mother of three young children is not revealed to the reader until page 401 of 481. Rather, the controls she exercises over her progeny are gradually revealed in parallel with their restrictive effects. The slow revelation of details in the third part of the novel allows the reader to perceive the misguided nature of Ariah's behavior towards her children, creating suspense and encouraging the anticipation of yet another disaster.

The tight family unit over which Ariah rules seems like a textbook example of Cooper's theory of the toxic nature of the family which wields its destructive power against the autonomy of its individual members. "The family," writes Cooper, "terrorizing itself and others, is adept at convincing people of the uselessness of maintaining doubt about its problems. Unable to bear doubt about itself and its ability to generate mental health and acceptable behavior, it suppresses in each of its members, the possibility to doubt."[108] Indeed, after her husband's untimely death, Ariah, desiring to "protect" her family, makes a variety of questionable decisions. She refused the life insurance money and sold the big house in Luna Park and moved with her children to Baltic Street where they would think of themselves as "the *near-destitute* Burnabys" (*TF* 402). She also extracted a promise of her eldest son that in

[107] Sanford Pinsker, "Joyce Carol Oates's *Wonderland*: A Hungering for Personality," *Critique* 20.2 (1978): 62.
[108] My translation of: "La famille, en se terrorisant et en terrorisant, est habile à convaincre de l'inutilité d'entretenir le doute sur ces problèmes. Ne pouvant supporter de douter d'elle-même ni de ses capacités d'engendrer santé mentale et attitudes convenables, elle suprime en chacun de ses membres la possibilité de douter." Cooper 11.

order to "protect" his siblings, he would never talk about his father (*TF* 330, 347). Finally, her most sinister reaction might be her refusal to acknowledge the importance of the defunct man, as the collective voice of her children reveals:

> Never would Ariah speak of him. Never would Ariah allow us to ask about him. It was not that our unnamed father was dead (and had died, as we would come to know, in mysterious circumstances) but there had been no father. Long before his death he'd been dead to us, by his own choice.
> He had betrayed us. He had gone outside the family. (*TF* 278)

Her protections, however, are not limited to the memory of Dirk Burnaby. In addition, Ariah is markedly unambitious for her children. Unusual parental behavior, certainly. She effectively maneuvers Chandler into attending a university close to home, saying "*You know how strain upsets you. What if something terrible happened to you. So far from home*" (*TF* 323). As for Royall, he is encouraged not to attend college at all: "*Over-reaching. Ambition. What does it get a man, it gets him dead*" (*TF* 300). Ariah seems to have been convinced that her sheer will could still the effects of time. Chandler realizes the folly of this, though he does not want to contradict his mother: "Chandler had wanted to ask his mother: How long could you expect Royall not to be curious about his father? And Juliet? Any reasonable mother would know it was only a matter of time" (*TF* 348). Ariah, however, is not concerned with being reasonable, she simply does not think about it.

Yet in spite of their mother's overbearing nature, there will ultimately be hope for the Burnaby children, as the next section will show. "Like most of my family novels," Oates explains in an essay for *The Guardian*, "*The Falls* begins with an older generation that will give birth to, and eventually yield the world to a younger generation: the Burnabys' three children – Chandler, Royall and Juliet – who in their very different ways move beyond the tragically limited world of their parents."[109] Indeed, the path of the Burnaby children illustrates the pattern of liberation described by Cooper: "In short, we must want and be able

[109] Joyce Carol Oates, "Better Nature," *The Guardian* (11 August 2007).

to summarize all of our family's past, thus achieving our liberation with respect to it." In this way, "we can reach the rare situation of truly and freely loving our parents instead of being imprisoned in a stifling and ambiguous love."[110]

1.1.1.3. Hope For the Next Generation: EROSION TIME . . .

Most of the discussions between Oates and interviewers during publicity appearances to promote this novel in 2004 focus on the events surrounding the suicide and the lawyer-crusader with very little time devoted to the next generation. Whether this was due to lack of interest in the third part of the novel or a desire not to reveal the work's ending is unclear, though it may be related to decreased reader interest in the final section which is perceived as less juicy and romantic. However, Oates herself places a great deal of importance on elements of Part III as shown by several comments made during her discussion with John Mullan. For example, she reveals that the scene in the cemetery between Royall and the woman in black is the part of the novel that came first and that Bud Stonecrop is the novelist's favorite character after Ariah.[111] In addition, it is in this crucial part that a sort of equilibrium is finally reached.

Part III of *The Falls* is almost exclusively devoted to the motif of questing characters. Chandler, Royall and Juliet's problematic sense of self is compounded because on top of the inherent mysteries of life their parents had to face, they must deal with artificial gaps in knowledge imposed on them by their mother. Here, the Burnaby children are presented as young adults, each suffering in a different way from their "fatherless" condition:

> "Near-destitute" she [Ariah] described us. We would grow up clinging to this mysterious phrase without knowing what it meant, exactly. Except that *near-destitute* was a permanent condition, possibly a spiritual condition, special to us. The fatherless Burnaby children. (*TF* 275)

[110] My translation of: "En bref, nous devrions vouloir et arriver à résumer tout le passé de notre famille, accomplissant ainsi notre libération par rapport à elle [...] on peut arriver à la rare situation d'aimer vraiment et librement ses parents, au lieu d'être emprisonné dans un amour étouffant et ambigu." Cooper 12.
[111] John Mullan, Guardian Book Club Interview with Joyce Carol Oates (14 August 2007).

The chapter "The Woman in Black" which introduces us to Royall presents a young man going through the motions, conditioned by his mother's[112] and society's[113] visions of him. Royall is initially of a type that acts instinctively, without comprehending the reasons for his actions, but also without questioning them. When he first appears in Part III, he is described as "heartsick," but "who knew why?" (*TF* 279). On his way to work, he unexpectedly stops at a cemetery, but "Royall wasn't one to ask himself *Why the hell have I stopped here?*" (*TF* 282). In fact, it turns out that Royall navigates his life in a sort of mentally anaesthetized state. He is unambitious; his tourist industry job is "work that kept him busy and didn't require much thought." After all, he reasons, "*It hurts too much to think. There's no future in it*" (*TF* 292). Royall's zombie-like existence may be due to the fact that his mother has deprived him of a part of himself. Therefore, he is not completely whole. Others, he understands, "knew who he, Royall, was, in a way that Royall himself didn't exactly know, because Ariah had forbidden him such knowledge" (*TF* 295). He appears as a being operating on a more emotional plane than those around him. Interrogated by his fiancée about the origin of his "strange ideas," "Royall hadn't wanted to say *Out of my dreams. Out of the earth*" (*TF* 280). The importance of Royall's dream-life becomes clear after his unusual encounter in the cemetery with the woman in black. During this episode, he behaves so uncharacteristically he is convinced the experience can only have occurred in a dream world: "Thinking *It could not have happened. That wasn't me.* [...] *God damn it could not have happened. Must've been a dream*" (*TF* 293-294). Dreamy feelings, it turns out, often plague him as he is going through the motions of working: "Sometimes, though, Royall felt himself not-real in that place. In the midst of spray, squeals of passengers, the heaving bucking boat. His thoughts drifted away, he slipped into an eerie dream of flailing his arms and legs underwater" (*TF* 334).

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[112] "Virtually as a baby he'd learned that there were things you didn't say, and didn't ask. If you made a blunder, Mom would stiffen and back away as if you'd spat on her. If you behaved the right way, Mom would hug, kiss, rock you in her thin but strong arms." (*TF* 281)

[113] "He'd been so well-liked, he'd been unaware, maybe, of another way of being; as a dreamer is unaware he's asleep until wakened." (*TF* 300)

The other two siblings, Chandler and Juliet, are also searching for meaning connected to the lost parts of themselves, yet the sense of loss manifests itself in their lives in different ways. Chandler attempts to fill the void created by the untold family secrets about his father's life by trying to help others through his involvement as a crisis intervention volunteer. Unable to help himself, he attempts to compensate by reaching out:

> *Why? Because I need to help others.*
> *Because I need to help. And there are others.*
> *Because I need. I need.*
> *Why?* (*TF* 341)

This is insufficient, however. As if reenacting the principles of his science lesson "EROSION TIME EROSION TIME" (*TF* 341), he seems to have been worn down over time by his mother's insistence he stay close to home and never speak about his deceased father, becoming indifferent to his physical well-being. Finally, Juliet was the youngest at the time of their father's death and, it seems, the most affected by it. Not able to understand why he "went away" as Chandler evasively explained to her as a young girl (*TF* 413), Juliet takes refuge in a secret inner life in which she hears the voice of her father urging her to join him in The Falls: "*Juliet! Juliet! Burn-a-by! Shame, shame's the name. You know your name. Come to your father in The Falls*" (*TF* 411). The Burnaby children's quests will be developed in more depth in Part III of this dissertation as certain of their questions about their family's past lead to an amateur investigation into their father's life and death.

Yet there is another implication of the erosion/time concept which is tied to the positive connotations associated with the theme of evolution, the idea that later generations will learn something from those that preceded. This does seem to be the case for Chandler, Royall and Juliet. At the end of the novel, the three children have worked through their difficulties and are equally balanced on the chronological beam of their lives, comfortable now with what they do not know about the past and hopeful for the future. Whereas Ariah sought to survive by cutting herself off, her children each find renewed purpose through

embracing the external world and developing relationships. They cannot stop time but have decided to flow harmoniously with it.

1.1.2. Relationships: Problem or Solution?

Faced with incomprehensible and incommunicable aspects of the self and unable to find satisfactory answers to philosophical questions provoked by individual experience, Oates's characters turn their expectations toward relationships as the place wherein meaning must lie. Such bonds, however, though potentially able to provide meaning, offer, at the same time, their own mysteries. What more natural place to look for relationships than the community into which we are born, that is to say, the family? In response to the question "*The Falls* could be described as a family saga. What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing families today?" Oates wrote: "Exactly as in *The Falls* – the threats to the family from outside the family. These have increased dramatically with time."[114] Yet this response seems oversimplified and only alludes to half the problem. Oates's fiction also clearly points to a similar threat from inside the family.

Oates's 2008 story "The Blind Man's Sighted Daughters"[115] depicts two middle-age women trying to decide how to care for their eighty-one-year-old father with failing health who has gone almost completely blind. The two women suspect their father of involvement in a never-solved double homicide from their girlhood though they have no concrete evidence. The poisonous atmosphere of the father's house has already begun to have a debilitating effect on the younger daughter, Helen, who has quit her job to care for the man. It soon begins eating away at Abigail, too, when she comes home for a visit. In the final, climactic scene, Abigail almost suffocates her father with a pillow, yet Helen manages to pull her away in time.

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[114] "BookPage Interview September 2004: Meet Joyce Carol Oates."
[115] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Blind Man's Sighted Daughers," *The Best American Mystery Stories 2008*, eds. George Pelecanos and Otto Penzler (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008) 225-245.

At the story's close, nothing has been resolved, and Abigail flees her childhood home, leaving her sister and father exactly as she had found them several days before. In this family anecdote, the danger clearly comes from within. The overbearing, most likely murderous, father is so filled with self-loathing and hate that it begins to effect his children, spreading like a contagious disease. The only way to limit the contamination is to keep him in a sort of quarantine, reducing the number of people with whom he comes in contact. In this story, the blind man's toxic attitude poisons those around him, recalling the actual chemical waste described in *The Falls* which creates a malignant environment that has detrimental effects on the entire community.

In *The Falls* as well the danger comes as much from inside the family as from without. The rigidity and desire to control associated with the families in this novel has negative effects on those characters not strong enough to make the break required for a total fulfillment of selfhood. One of Dirk's disquieting thoughts about his wife and three children – "*They are my tightrope now* Dirk thought tenderly. *Unless they are my abyss*" (*TF* 189) – conveniently exposes the dilemma of self/other which is exaggerated by dependent relationships such as those which exist among family members. Does family hold us up? Or does it hold us back? In Cooper's view, the effects of the family dynamic are very serious, even potentially fatal. First, it smothers people, making them feel incomplete. Second, it creates predetermined roles rather than letting the individual be responsible for his own identity. Third, the family curbs the social interactions of its members. Finally, it imposes a system of taboos on its children.[116] However, Cooper also suggests that "[the family] also exists to incite us to transcend all the conditioning it subjects us to."[117] *The Falls* certainly provides examples of Cooper's path to liberation from the family and the pitfalls that line it along the way.

[116] Cooper 26-29.
[117] My translation of: "elle existe aussi pour nous inciter à dépasser tout le conditionnement qu'elle nous a fait subir." Cooper 17-18.

1.1.2.1. Husbands and Wives

The opaque wall that divides self and other becomes more apparent in cases of relationships between those who are by nature very close, such as a loving husband and wife. In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva defines love in the following way: "Love is the time and space in which 'I' assumes the right to be extraordinary. Sovereign yet not individual. Divisible, lost, annihilated; but also, and through imaginary fusion with the loved one, equal to the infinite space of super-human psychism."[118] This theory suggests that love provides the support for the establishment of connections and meanings. However, this does not mean that love precludes communication difficulties. Rather, Oates's novel seems to indicate that it accentuates them as the urge for community is put in direct conflict with the urge for individuality.

In the four corpus works, Ariah and Dirk Burnaby of *The Falls* present the only example of what one might think of as a "normal" married couple. Originally their relationship is depicted in fairy tale-like terms – "They were married, and each became the other's best friend" (*TF* 118) –, but it is soon clear that no matter how symbiotic their relationship is, they cannot sustain a state of blissful happiness indefinitely. For one thing, the very sequence of events that leads to their union is tenuous and mysterious: "Neither wished to think how accidental it was, they'd met, and fallen in love, and married" (*TF* 117). In addition, outside demands of family, friends and work take their toll, prompting the question "They were married. Why wasn't that enough?" (*TF* 132). Indeed, one of their mistakes may have been in acting so impulsively that they alienated the other people in their lives. Ariah and Dirk's marriage prompts "whispers, murmurs, accusations. Tearful proclamations of disapproval. *How can you? What are you thinking of? Only of yourself? So soon after Gilbert's death? Have you no shame?*" (*TF* 121). Yet what choice had they: "as Dirk Burnaby

[118] Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 5.

said, more somberly, 'When it's love at first sight, you may as well give in. You're doomed'" (*TF* 115). Ariah and Dirk thus cordon themselves off in a self-enclosed relationship that limits connections with the outside world. For this reason, their marriage is destined to failure.

Dirk and Ariah embody the dilemma of a loving couple who, despite their mutual affection, struggle to understand each other. From the beginning of their marriage, in the midst of all the talk of their happiness, the narrator emphasizes their differences. From the multiple variations on the "They were married ..." line that serves as the refrain for the first chapter of Part II, one phrase that is usually associated with the idea of marriage is distinctly missing. We never read "They were married, and became one." Dirk reflects that "his wife's moods were wayward and inscrutable" (*TF* 141) and is often surprised at things Ariah says (often related to her sense of insecurity in their relationship), whereas Ariah is unable to understand Dirk's reactions of offense: "For the life of her, Ariah couldn't understand why" (*TF* 144). She eventually comes to the realization that she does not fit in with Dirk's social set: "She wasn't the woman he should have married, clearly" (*TF* 182). Dirk and Ariah are a mismatched couple in that they are not from the same society. The consequence of going outside one's "set" is that one is then forever forced to deal with difference, a trying exercise even when it is completely voluntary.

Finally, Ariah and Dirk are unable to communicate about Dirk's lawsuit. Responding to Dirk's plea that his wife knows him better than he knows himself

> Ariah laughed thinly. "That cliché! 'Know me better than I know myself.' Marriage is a sustained *folie à deux*. Like crossing a tightrope without a safety net beneath, and not looking down. So the more we know of each other, the less it signifies. You're a lawyer, Mr. Burnaby, one of the best. So you know." (*TF* 240)

Thus the stage is set for the tragic misunderstanding between Ariah and Dirk that will be unfortunately fixed and sealed by the husband's untimely death. He will never be able to convincingly explain that he had not had an affair, that he loves his wife and family.

Ariah and Dirk's happiness at the beginning of their marriage is predicated exclusively on the community of two that their union creates. They decided not to care about what others think of their spontaneous act. As Ariah passionately explains to her parents: "'We love each other and we see no reason to pretend that we don't. Especially we see no reason to pretend that our private behavior is anyone's business except our own'" (*TF* 121). This same mechanism of not caring what others think returns at the end of Part II with Dirk's involvement in the Love Canal case. Ironically, the first incidence is the reason for Ariah's happiness, whereas the second stokes her growing sense of unhappiness.

1.1.2.2. Parents and Children

Fearful, Ariah had planned, from the beginning of her married life, for the eventuality of losing her husband: "It was only logical. Knowing that your husband might one day leave you, or be snatched from you, you must have several children at least" (*TF* 163). The possibility expressed by the modal "might" later develops into a certitude. Whether Ariah's reasoning is indeed logical is questionable. Nevertheless, it is *a* logic, Ariah's morbid logic that seems to her to be proven by the exact realization of the loss she feared. Widowed a second time, Ariah reacts by creating a sort of micro-domestic autarchy marching to the insistant refrain "family is all there is on earth." In Ariah's instruction to her children "always there was a *they, them*. Always there was *we, us*" (*TF* 275).

Though she despises the Burnaby family, Ariah unknowingly reproduces their snobbish behavior by attempting to separate her family from the rest of the world. Ellen Friedman's analysis of an earlier Oates character, Jesse from *Wonderland*, applies to Ariah as well: "by expanding psychically – he tries to possess his family. These are attempts to substitute the self for the world in order to become invulnerable to loss and defeat."[119] Ariah's

[119] Friedman, "Journey" 43.

act of possession has to do with blocking out a portion of the family's past. In this way, too, she is like her fictional predecessor Jesse who "in denying his past, in not accepting it as part of himself," writes Friedman, "has violated the law of homeostasis, which requires that one adjust to pain. He lives severed from his past and thus out of the normal continuum of time."[120]

However, Oates reminds us that such a refusal of external connections is not healthy. In addition, it appears to be unrealistic and difficult to sustain indefinitely. Though she tries, Ariah is unable to completely cut herself off from the outside world: "It was an irony of Ariah's life that, being so reclusive among her neighbors, so intent upon preserving her privacy, she drew attention to herself as few other residents of Baltic Street did" (*TF* 395). Eventually, Royall's encounter with the woman in black sets in motion a chain of events through which Ariah's children finally stage their rebellion as indicated through Royall's shift from accepting to questioning his mother's wisdom: "'Life outside the family is a masquerade,' Ariah said flatly. 'You kids will learn.' / *But not inside the family?* Royall shifted his shoulders uncomfortably" (*TF* 321).

The evolution of plot in *The Falls* suggests that it is not enough to simply identify life's little mysteries, rather, one must become curious about one's past in order to find a comfortable place in the present. It is not a healthy solution to live in isolation as Ariah attempts to do after Dirk's death, cutting herself off from any contact with her husband's family, moving to a lower class section of town and keeping the truth (as she knows it) secret from her children. Common cultural convention maintains that "truth will out" and it is this latent potential that makes secrets so inherently toxic and disconcerting. In the words of Walker Percy's character Lancelot: "There is something worse than knowing the worst. It is

[120] Friedman, "Journey" 42.

not knowing."[121] This same sentiment is felt in earnest by the three Burnaby children by whose inquiry in the third section of the novel Oates expressly links the concept of selfhood with the possession of, or at least the quest for, knowledge.

As Oates has remarked on several occasions, children live in a world of perpetual mystery – as they learn "to monitor what is 'real' and what is 'not real'; what is benign, and what not" (*HTG* 306) – constantly confronted with the secret world of adult life that is like a wall erected against them. Whether the wall is erected in love or in hate may not matter, as Royall lucidly realizes: "You yearn to hurt them, sometimes. Those who love you too much" (*TF* 316). This is the case of the Burnaby children whose mother "closed my heart to him [Dirk] and to all the Burnabys," refusing to speak about him as though he had never existed (*TF* 401). This is also what her children reproach her for once they are grown and able to think for themselves: "*You wept for Dirk Burnaby in secret, didn't you. Yet you forbade his children to weep for him. You cheated us of grief*" (*TF* 395). Ironically, of course, because nothing is ever so simple, Ariah probably does not know much she could tell her children, thinking herself that Dirk was a suicide who knowingly left his family. Her stubborn silence on the subject is what will cause her children to search for the truth, something they might never have done had they believed their father took his own life. Later, emancipated by the search process, Ariah's children will achieve an equilibrium between knowledge and mystery. After Chandler's investigation and confrontation with his mother, for example, he finally accepts the fact that complete comprehension of his mother will remain forever elusive: "Never would he understand his mother. And so he would have to love her, without understanding" (*TF* 403). In a 1974 interview with Joe David Bellamy, Oates spoke of the problematic family unit, saying that once "'something has gone wrong inside this small

[121] Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 131. Oates's review of Percy's novel is collected in *Modern Critical Views: Walker Percy*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 63-67.

universe [the family], then nothing can ever be made right.'"[122] However, *The Falls* is certainly an example to the contrary and proof both that her vision is constantly evolving and that any generalization about Oates's work is challenged by the sheer volume of her writing.

1.1.2.3. Children and Others

However, before the above-mentioned state of equilibrium, or homeostasis, can be reached by the protagonists of the younger generation a process of opening and awakening must take place for each of them. The dramatization of this process occupies the third part of the novel. Its structure follows a particular pattern. Three short three-page anecdotal chapters, usually recounting a myth or legend, are followed by three long fifty-page chapters each devoted to one of the Burnaby children and his/her pattern of personal discovery.

Friedman writes of Oates's *Wonderland* that

> Jesse's narcissistic self-aggrandizement and Shelley's nihilism are deluded attempts to escape the impinging external world by subsituting the self for the world. Jesse and Shelley suffer from a distorted sense of self; they presume the absolute primacy of self. Their refusal to acknowledge the world leads them to opposite routes of narcissism and nihilism.[123]

A similar reading can be made of Ariah and her children. When Chandler finally confronts his mother with several questions related to his past, she justifies her refusal of the insurance money saying, "'It wasn't pride, I am not a creature of pride. When he left us, I closed my heart to him and to all the Burnabys'" (*TF* 401). Of course, Ariah *is* guilty of pride. She is guilty of considering the loss of her husband as a personal affront. Closing her heart to him and his family, she quite egotistically closes off a part of her children's memory of the past and their ability to access it, attempting to occupy the psychic parental space all by herself.

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[122] Quoted in Pamela Smiley, "Incest, Roman Catholicism, and Joyce Carol Oates," *College Literature* 18.1 (February 1991): 42. Smiley is quoting from Joe David Bellamy, "Interview with Oates," *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*, Ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974) 19-31.
[123] Friedman, "Journey" 38.

Ariah's confining dogma finds an objective correlative in the text in the old rusted chickenwire rabbit coops found in the back yard and cellar of the Baltic Street house: "Chandler asked what was the point of cooping rabbits in such small cages but the reply was unclear" (*TF* 277). This motif also appears in a 2003 short story by Oates entitled "The Haunting."[124] Six-year-old Marybeth recounts certain of her impressions from the time of her father's brutal murder and the family's subsequent move to a row house in a city a thousand miles away. Like the Burnaby's Niagara Falls row house, this house also has rabbit cages in the backyard and cellar. Inspected in daylight, these hutches are empty. Yet at night Marybeth is convinced she hears the rabbits in the cellar: "In the night when the rabbits cry for help, it's because they are trapped in the cages and it's like they know I can hear them; I am the only one to hear them. *Help us! Help us we don't want to die!*" (*FS* 100). Marybeth, too, feels trapped – interrogated by her teacher she feels herself "freeze like a scared rabbit" (*FS* 104) – in the mystery of childhood, cut off from the adult world of knowledge. Secrets and rumors flutter around her constantly, but complete comprehension eludes her. Oates uses the rabbit cages as a symbol for the similarly confining states inhabited by her child characters.

One of the defense mechanisms engaged in by Oates characters faced with an existence they can neither comprehend nor control is to give up the effort, leave their fate to a roll of the dice.[125] This is precisely what Chandler's girlfriend, Melinda, accuses him of after the crisis intervention episode with Al Mayweather in which he "reveal[ed] himself to Al Mayweather, unprotected." Chandler's reasoning as he steps out of the police van placing himself in harm's way cannot fail to recall both that of the man who is probably his biological father, Gilbert, and that of the man he knows as his father, Dirk, both of whom reconcile

[124] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Haunting." This story was first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* 104.4 (April 2003): 113-123. It was collected with minor changes in *The Female of the Species: Tales of Mystery and Suspense* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2005) 95-110. Citations are taken from the collection which will be abbreviated to *FS* in in-text notes.

[125] Oates has continued to use the "roll of the dice" motif in her fiction. It is present throughout her 2010 novella *A Fair Maiden*.

themselves to their fates: "He understood that he was doing the right thing. *In the purity of his heart, he could not fail to do the right thing*." Similarly as well, Chandler feels "he was beyond the Deadline, rapidly approaching the Falls. There was comfort in this" (*TF* 371). Luckily for Chandler, however, he is physically rescued by the police and mentally shaken out of his stupor by Melinda's angry reaction to his self-directed indifference. Melinda has realized that his actions have something to do with his lost father(s):

> *Forced move.* He vowed then, in the spring of his twenty-eighth year, he would take his life in hand.
>
> He'd been drifting, passive. Like one hypnotized by The Falls. Melinda had forced him to see. She'd held up a reflecting surface to Chandler he hadn't been able to shield his eyes from, as one must shield one's eyes from the terrible visage of Medusa, stunned by a truth that has been both obvious and elusive. *Toss your life like dice, as if worthless*. It was uncanny, Melinda must love him. She had plumbed the depth of his soul. (*TF* 374-375)

This indifference that Melinda identifies and condemns in Chandler may be read as a symptom of his mother's "engulfing domination."[126] If Chandler is able to break the spell and ultimately transcend his confused, questioning state, it is thanks to his relationship with Melinda. Likewise, Royall is awakened by the woman in black, and Juliet pulled from her trance by Bud Stonecrop. These respective experiences are the catalysts for the quests that ultimately allow these three characters to achieve an equilibrium. These cases, too, can be read as examples of what Friedman calls "the isolation self being confronted with its otherness" to positive ends.[127]

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[126] Friedman, "Journey" 37. Expression used by Friedman in her article on *Wonderland* to refer to the narcissistic control Jesse attempts to wield over his daughter. Clearly a similar parent/child relationship is dramatized in *The Falls*.

[127] Friedman, "Journey" 37.

1.1.3. Range of Human Experience: Dreams and Psychological Reality

1.1.3.1. From Fairy Tale to Reality

The juxtaposition of highly realistic passages with others that much more resemble flights of fancy is an important characteristic of Oates's fiction. However, it is not one that has been consistently accepted and understood. Readers have been disconcerted by the structure and language of long Oates novels such as *The Falls* which begin in the past, using fairy-tale or mythological language and gradually giving way, as the plot chronologically rejoins the present, to a language more resembling realism.[128] This is a problem which has plagued the reception of Oates's work since the beginning of her career as scholars such as Rose Marie Burwell have pointed out. In an article about Oates's early novel *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Burwell counters critics who lament the melodramatic nature of the denouement by focusing on the philosophical nature of Oates's realism, a realism "of a metaphysical brand that recognizes among first principles the existence of real evil – not the sentimentalized social evils of Steinbeck and Dreiser – but the ubiquitous, gratuitous evil potential in all human relations."[129] Indeed, Oates's realism must be understood in terms of unconscious, emotional response rather than as the expression of cold, hard fact. How is one to understand a novel that seems to operate in different sections on such incongruous levels? For the author, these different levels are not at all incompatible. This formula mirrors the way, in Oates's view, the difference between past and present is actually experienced in real life. In her essay "On Fiction in Fact" she explains that "the truth of one era becomes, as if by an artist's sleight of hand, the mythology of subsequent eras."[130] Thus, it seems that the past can

[128] This is how Oates describes the structure of her nobel in a 14 August 2007 interview with John Mullan for *The Guardian* book club. She is adamant that the work is not a naturalistic, realistic novel.
[129] Rose Marie Burwell, "Joyce Carol Oates and an Old Master," *Critique* 15.1 (1973): 57.
[130] Joyce Carol Oates, "On Fiction in Fact," *Where I've Been, And Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose* (New York: Plume, 1999) 78.

only ever be viewed through a distorting lens, which explains Oates's desire to treat different time periods in different aesthetic ways in *The Falls*.

Oates's conception of the problematic nature of our relationship to time can help explain the reference to philsophical ideas that may be noticed throughout her fiction. She writes in a review of Walker Percy's *Lancelot* that "no genuine writer of fiction need rely upon philosophical 'ideas,'" claiming it is enough for Percy to be "wonderfully alive to the sounds and textures and odors of life."[131] However, it has already become evident through the opening discussion of Oates's journal entries and the first sections of this chapter on *The Falls* that in Oates's world philosophical musings *are* an inherent component of the "textures" of life. In addition to the incessant existential questioning of her characters, Oates occasionally mentions the theories of actual philosophers. One of these is the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) who developed a theory of knowledge that corresponds to the problematic dichotomy between past and present to be found in Oates's works. In Schopenhauer's philosophy, one can only ever know the present. In an essay entitled "On the Vanity of Existence" he explains: "Our existence has no foundation on which to rest except the transient present. Thus its form is essentially unceasing *motion*, without any possibility of that repose which we continually strive after."[132] This concept is rendered in Oates's work by an instability of meaning that will become more and more apparent in subsequent sections.

Also in "On Fiction in Fact" Oates insists on the problematic nature of language when put to work in an attempt to communicate past experience: "In any case, language by its very nature tends to distort experience. With the best of intentions, in recalling the past, if even a dream of the previous night, we are already altering – one might say violating – the original experience, which may have been wordless and was certainly improvised."[133] This insistence

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[131] Joyce Carol Oates, "Lancelot," *Modern Critical Views: Walker Percy*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 63-64.
[132] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, Trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1970) 52-53.
[133] Joyce Carol Oates, "On Fiction in Fact" 77.

on the problematic nature of language recalls the work of another philosopher alluded to by Oates, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who believed that our difficulty in deciphering the world around us was intricately related to our problematic understanding of the workings and limits of language. Wittgenstein argued that some things can only be "shown," and not "said," such as ethics, aesthetics, religion and "problems of life." "In Wittgenstein's view such matters," A. C. Grayling explains, "are not themselves ruled out as nonsensical; it is only the attempt to say anything about them which is so"; they belong to the realm of the mystical.[134] Oates's adherence to such philosophical ideas combined with her desire to explore the emotional and unconscious realms contributes to the legitimacy of a project to employ different aesthetic modes to communicate different realms of experience.

The central events of *The Falls* begin on 12 June 1950 with the suicide jumper at Horseshoe Falls and close on 21 September 1978 with the memorial service for Dirk Burnaby. However, both the structure and language of the text make it clear that 1978 is the novel's present. Events recounted in Parts I and II belong to the mythical realm of memory. Thus, the structure employed by Oates in *The Falls* conveys the idea that the past can only be experienced in the present as dream-like memory; only the present can be experienced as "real."

The story of Ariah's ordeal in Niagara Falls is communicated in the language of fairy tales, meaning, as Marie Louise von Franz explains, that specific details are of less importance than archetypal elements. "One can see how a story originates," writes von Franz. "There is always a nucleus form of a parapsychological experience or a dream." However, as the story is retold and passed along, subsequent tellers will drop elements of the story which are uninteresting to them "and what is archetypal in the story will remain in the memory."[135] I have been using the terms fairy tale and myth basically interchangeable. Though von Franz

[134] A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2001) 19.
[135] Marie-Louise von Franz, *Shadow and Evil In Fairy Tales*, rev. ed. (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1995) 11-12.

distinguishes the two, she seems to acknowledge that the difference is basically one of degree: "The myth in general is more embedded in civilization. You cannot think of the Gilgamesh Epic apart from the Babylonian-Sumerian civilization, and you cannot think of the *Odyssey* apart from the Grecian, but the fairy tale can migrate better, for it is so elementary and so reduced to its basic structural elements that it appeals to everybody."[136]

Fairy tales, as Oates herself reminds us, are not necessarily synonymous with "happily ever after":

> For the term "fairy tale" is itself ambiguous. Sometimes it is frankly pejorative, dismissive. Its received connotation has to do with benign, rather brainless fantasy: *And they lived happily ever after*. But many fairy tales are nightmares of senseless cruelty and violence (as in "The Girl without Hands" a father chops off his daughter's hands to save himself from the devil – and this, one of the "good" fathers in the Grimm collection); and the terms of "happiness" in others (Hansel and Gretel's reconciliation with the father who had left hem to die in the forest, for instance; the torture death of Snow White's wicked stepmother) are problematic to say the least.[137]

The precarious and potentially problematic status of "happiness" is alluded to in the novel through reference to Ariah's favorite movie, Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. As Ariah astutely reflects: "You begin with a wish, and the wish comes true, and you can't shut off the wish. / Like 'The Sorceror's Apprentice,' the comic-nightmare sequence in *Fantasia*" (*TF* 17). In yet another example of the ambiguous nature of the fairy tale, Oates describes Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as "a New England fairy tale of the more wicked variety, in which a 'happy ending' is both ironic and literal, the consequence of unrepentant witchcraft and a terrible sacrifice – of others."[138]

Fairy tale, when employed by Oates, refers to a fictional world which is "ahistoric and timeless, politically static."[139] Certainly Ariah's story cannot be mistaken for one of frivolous

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[136] Von Franz 12.
[137] Joyce Carol Oates, "'In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having . . .': Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales," *Where I've Been, And Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose* (New York: Plume, 1999) 10.
[138] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Witchcraft of Shirley Jackson," *The New York Review of Books* 56.12 (8 October 2009).
[139] Oates, "In Olden Times" 13.

gaiety. It is the tale of a timeless woman playing the part that has fallen to her to be played. "For seven days and seven nights she kept her vigil," we read (*TF* 73). Already at this point she is beginning to be thought of as "the Widow-Bride of The Falls" (*TF* 75) and is described as acting as if she were "under the spell of the thunderous Horseshoe Falls" (*TF* 76). In this way, Ariah is a perfect fictional example of the process of myth-making described by Mircea Eliade who explains that "popular memory has difficulty retaining 'individual' events and 'authentic' figures. Rather, it functions along different structural lines, retaining *categories* instead of *events*, *archetypes* in place of *historical figures*."[140]

Dirk Burnaby diligently accompanies Ariah during her vigil and is there to play the part of the handsome prince catching the princess when she faints after finally identifying her husband's bloated body:

> Only then did the Widow-Bride lose her remarkable stamina, and her strength. Seven days and seven nights of vigilance were finished. Her eyes rolled back in her head like a shaken doll's and she would have fallen to the ground except, cursing himself for his fate, Dirk Burnaby caught her in his arms. (*TF* 85)

Up to this point Ariah corresponds to the traditional fairy-tale heroine who, according to Oates, "passively" and "unquestioningly" accepts her fate and understands that "fate is deserved because it happens to you; it doesn't happen to you because it's deserved."[141]

Following his discussion of the myth-making of historical personalities, Eliade cites the example of the Romanian village of Maramuresh and its tale of tragic love. This is the account of the transformation of an event into myth which a Romanian folklorist was able to witness firsthand. A tale was told by villagers of a young bridegroom bewitched by a fairy and caused to fall off a cliff to his death. His betrothed, went the tale, spontaneously launched into a beautiful funeral lamentation with mythological allusions. According to the story, these

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[140] My translation of: "la mémoire populaire retient difficilement des événements 'individuels' et des figures 'authentiques'. Elle fonctionne au moyen de structures différentes; *catégories* au lieu d'*événements, archétypes* au lieu de *personnages historiques*." Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969) 59.

[141] Oates, "In Olden Times" 12.

events had taken place long ago. However, it turned out, upon further investigation, that the story was based upon actual events that had taken place only forty years before. The actual events, related to the folklorist by the unlucky bride-to-be, comprised neither fairy nor unusually beautiful spontaneous funeral lamentation. Thus, concludes Eliade, "it had taken only a few years, even in the presence of the principal witness, for an event to be stripped of its historical authenticity and turned into a legendary tale."[142]

As in the example cited by Eliade, Ariah's experience is mythologized almost simultaneously with the character's experience of it: "The Widow-Bride had become another Niagara legend, but no one would remember her name" (*TF* 88). As further proof of the distortion of these events in popular memory, in the third part of the novel, Royall will come home from school with tales of ghosts in the gorge. In the events he recounts, which he claims happened a hundred and a thousand years before, various elements of local folklore are jumbled together, including Indian stories, the Deadline and the widow-bride:

> Ghosts came out of the Gorge at night, Royall told Ariah excitedly. Some of these were Indians, and some were white people. It was a white man taken by the Indians and made to swim in the river and the river carried him over The Falls, and there was a "red-haired young bride" who searched for him "for seven days and seven nights" and when she found him, drowned and dead, torn into pieces by the rapids, she "cast herself" into the Gorge, too. (*TF* 309)

The divide between public and private memory bemuses both Ariah and Dirk. Perusing newspaper clippings of the account of the seven-day search for Gilbert's body in The Falls, Dirk Burnaby reflects: "How strange it seemed to Dirk, the myriad actions and impressions of the long vigil reduced to such simple statements" (*TF* 88). Similarly, Ariah feels a discrepancy between personal experience and tales told of "the Widow-Bride of The Falls": "When Ariah hears people talking about 'the Widow-Bride of The Falls' she responds saying, 'Ridiculous! Worse than fairy tales'" (*TF* 175). However, it is not only the collective public consciousness that rewrites the past. It becomes clear in the text that Ariah's memory is

[142] My translation of: "Ainsi quelques années avaient suffi, malgré la présence du témoin principal, à dépouiller l'événement de toute authenticité historique, à le transformer en un récit légendaire." Eliade 61.

itself hazy. She does not remember everything that happened during her vigil as the Widow-Bride, as shown when she questions Dirk about the identity of his friend Clyde Colborne (*TF* 131-132).

The impulse to remember the past in general mythological terms is accompanied in the novel by a counter impulse to provide the gory details of certain events. Gilbert's romantic gesture in search of a sublime transcendence is quickly revealed by Oates in all its grotesque physicality as she describes both the body being ripped apart by the force of the plunging water and the state in which it is eventually recovered a week later. One generation's reality may become another's myth, but inversely, one person's myth may be brought home as cruelly real to those they leave behind. Once again, Oates's language shows that mystery is created out of conflicting perceptions as well as a natural human impulse toward story-telling.

1.1.3.2. Visions, Myths, Legends

"The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn – not the material of my everyday existence – but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself."[143] Thus explains Egaeus, wretched narrator of Poe's "Berenice," to describe the peculiar symptoms of the singular malady with which he is afflicted. Oates shares Poe's fascination for the inner life and, similar to Poe's Egaeus, her characters often experience inversions of the "real" and the "unreal." Explaining her fascination with the grotesque, Oates writes that it "is both 'real' and 'unreal' simultaneously, as states of mind are real enough – emotions, moods, shifting obsessions, beliefs – though immeasurable. The subjectivity that is the essence of the human is also the mystery that divides us irrevocably from one another" (*HTG* 307). An avid interest in the notion of ontological realities has in fact been present in her various non-fiction writings for

[143] Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice," *Gothic Short Stories*, ed. David Blair (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2002) 52-59.

decades already, as G. F. Waller observes when he remarks upon certain comments she made early in her career about the influence of dream on reality in the fiction of Dostoevsky and Yuli Daniel.[144] These preoccupations are evident in Oates's fiction as well. Her characters, writes Waller, live "in a world where the spirit and the dream are [...] consistently materialized" to the effect that "Oates's America is an experience, not a place; it is what our personalities create as well as what we are thrown into."[145]

Oates's way of exploring the question of the nature of being is to turn her inquiry inward to the states of mind so that we might think of reality in the philosophical sense, that is, as the juxtaposition of two concurrent but distinct worlds. As R. J. Hollingdale explains, from the very beginning of philosophy in the writing of Thales we find "the assertion that there exist two worlds, the 'real' and the 'apparent', that everything is 'really' something else and not what it 'appears' to be." Thus, the idea that "there are two worlds, the one perceived, the other a mystery" is already being evoked.[146] These two worlds may be described as the world the body inhabits (world of appearance) and the world the intellect inhabits in its thinking (world of reality). It is the "world of reality" that is of most importance to us and seems the most real because it is the one that we consistently carry with us in our minds in contrast to the "world of appearance" which we are constantly leaving behind as we pass through time. "The *supernatural* appears," explains Hollingdale, "with its gods and devils, heavens and hells, in that second world of thought and imagination. In memory the *past*, that which has vanished from the perceived world, continues to exist" in this "world of reality." The nature

[144] "[Oates] comments that in Dostoevsky 'reality is constantly turning into something else'; elsewhere she writes on the violent conjunction of reality and dream in the writing of Yuli Daniel, whose writing, she argues, 'is ordinary, and yet dreamlike, not surrealistic but faithful to the gentle impregnation of our real lives by our dream lives; and these 'dream' lives are not always interior, but part of a larger fantastic dream, totally out of our control.'" Waller 27-28.
[145] Waller 31, 29.
[146] R. J. Hollingdale, Introduction, *Essays and Aphorisms*, by Arthur Schopenhauer, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1970) 11-12.

of the past in relation to thought explains the unequal relationship between the worlds of appearance and reality.[147]

In a 2004 short story entitled "Panic," Oates writes of the brain's ability in some cases to block pain: "The work of mankind is to deny such knowledge. The labor of civilization, tribal life. Truth is dissolved in human wishes. The wish is an acid powerful enough to dissolve all knowledge."[148] This points to the mind's ability to create its own truth. Faced with such an observation, the power of the inner life cannot be denied, which explains its central position in Oates's fiction.

As we have seen, with Oates, realism, as understood in its strictest sense as "a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life" with an "emphasis on external reality,"[149] does not apply because of her insistence on the importance of depicting the interior life. As Pam Morris explains, "from an anti-realist, postmodern position [...] unmediated knowledge of the world is not available, discourses or textuality consitute the only sense of reality we can possibly perceive and know."[150] On the other hand, Wayne C. Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* offers a discussion of realism that gives the concept pertinence in Oates's fiction. Booth argues most novelists would agree that realistic effect is their goal. The problem arises from the fact that there are different conceptions of what constitutes "realistic effect" and therefore different ways of achieving it. Booth's analysis leads him to conclude that there are different views of what "realistic" writing really is and to identify three main variables: subject matter, structure and technique. Realism in the traditional sense concerns those "interested in whether the *subject matter* does justice to reality outside the book." However, the concept of realism has evolved since the nineteenth century. A more contemporary view of realism allows for the exploration of

[147] Hollingdale 13.
[148] Joyce Carol Oates, "Panic," *Dear Husband,: Stories* (New York: Ecco Press, 2009) 3-14. Originally published in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43:3 (Summer 2004): 413-421.
[149] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001; Oxford: University Press, 2008) 281-282.
[150] Pam Morris, *Realism*, The New Critical Idiom (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 142.

metaphysical Truth through various techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and open-endings.[151] It is this latter form of realism that provides the context for Oates's literary project, encompassing her mixture of the gothic, grotesque and supernatural which attempts to represent her characters' emotional states. Her realism is one that seeks to convey "real" emotions, which she considers to be at once "real" and "incalculable," a type of writing she refers to as "psychological realism."

In her introduction to *Best New American Voices 2003*, Oates discusses what is meant by the term "psychological realism":

> By "psychological realism" we mean, usually, the establishment of a central consciousness through whose perspective a story is narrated or unfolds; our involvement in the story depends largely upon the plausibility and worth of this central consciousness. Do we believe in him or her? Is the fictional world convincing? Unlike fantasy, realism derives much of its power from a skillful evocation of time and place.[152]

Three years later, she explains in an interview: "The tradition in which I see myself is that of psychological realism, which attempts to mirror the complex outside world of society, politics, art, domestic life, as well as to interpret it."[153] This conception of her fictional project has remained steady throughout her career as she referred to herself as a "psychological realist" as early as 1974, explaining that this involves taking "the area of the human psyche, or mind, as the centre of all experience of reality."[154] Thus, for Oates, psychological realism involves recounting a story from the rational view of a coherent (realistic, because believable) personality. To this end, developing the unconscious depths of the characters is as important as positing them in an authentic and believable exterior world.

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[151] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 55-57.
[152] Joyce Carol Oates, Introduction, *Best New American Voices 2003* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2002) x.
[153] Carole Burns, Interview with Joyce Carol Oates, "Off the Page: Joyce Carol Oates," *washingtonpost.com* (9 May 2006).
[154] "Face to Face," *Maclean's* (April 1974): 60. Cited by Waller 41. In a recently reprinted review about Flannery O'Connor's fiction, Oates writes that "the most elevated psychological realism [...] takes as its natural subject the *humanness* of its characters." "'Large and Startling Figures': The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," *In Rough Country: Essays and Reviews* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010) 109-110.

In Oates's fiction, therefore, a twist can be observed on what Roland Barthes has called "the reality effect" (*l'effet de réel*). Barthes used this term to refer to the elements of a literary text that have no repercussion on the outcome of the action but whose sole purpose is to give the reader the impression that the text is describing the real world, for example, much of the detail present in nineteenth century realist novels. Barthes' argument rests on the distinction between the real (*réel*) and the likely (*vraisemblable*). The former belongs to the domain of History, the latter to that of narration, meaning imitation. The reality effect is what helps maintain the illusion that the likely is actually real.[155] Whereas in realist novels, the reality effect is accomplished through the inclusion of what Barthes refers to as insignificant descriptive details, mentioning, for example, the presence of unimportant objects, in Oates's psychological realism the concern is no longer simply with the completeness of description of contemporary life in its exterior details, but rather with the creation of a plausible psychological point of view from which the events are experienced. If there is a reality effect at work in Oates, then, it concerns not the details of the outside world in which her characters evolve, but rather details of their emotional and other mental states.

This is similar to the process described by Flannery O'Connor when she evokes the notion of a "realism of distances," distinguishing "a realism of fact" from "the deeper kinds of realism." O'Connor's "realism of fact" is concerned "with the movement of social forces, with the typical, with fidelity to the way things look and happen in normal life."[156] In other words, this is the term she uses to refer to traditional concepts of fictional realism. The kind of realism that interests O'Connor, however, is of a sort that leans "away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected," a quality that she considers to be particularly at work in Southern fiction:

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[155] Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de Réel," *Communications* 11 (1968): 88.
[156] Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961) 39.

> In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework.[157]

The realist of distances, writes O'Connor, "believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious." Therefore,

> what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves – whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not.[158]

Realism of distances, therefore, has to do with "seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up."[159] Oates has written that O'Connors's work is "not meant to be realistic or naturalistic," rather it "should be read as a series of parables" that convey a spiritual realism which equates the mystery of life with the mystery of Christ.[160] In this way, O'Connor attempts to portary the psychic reality of her characters. "Her world," affirms Oates, "is that surreal primitive landscape in which the unconscious is a determining quantity that the conscious cannot defeat, because it cannot recognize."[161] Thus, both authors strive to create alternate forms of realism that account for the reality of the mysterious states of the mind.

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[157] O'Connor, "Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 40.
[158] O'Connor, "Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 41-42.
[159] O'Connor, "Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 44.
[160] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature* (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1974) 145.
[161] Oates, "Visionary Art" 176.

Many examples from *The Falls* point to a juxtaposition of distances between the real and the apparent, which simultaneously explore and enhance the mysterious relationship between conscious and unconscious states, between public and private personas. This results in the importance of dreams, premonitions and visions which are experienced as real by the characters in a way that reality (the exterior world) is not. Ariah's dream/vision of Dirk on the tightrope is an appropriate example:

> One night when she'd been Mrs. Dirk Burnaby for just fifteen days, she saw through the lattice window beyond their bed a sickle moon glowing through columns of mist like a winking eye. She was cradling her deeply sleeping husband in her arms. She meant to protect him forever! Yet her eyelids began to flutter. Her eyes were shutting. She opened them wide to see her husband crossing the immense Niagara Gorge on – what was it? A tightrope? A *tightrope*? His back was to her. His fair flaxen hair blew in the wind. He wore a black costume, ministerial. He was carrying a twelve-foot bamboo pole to balance himself. It was a performance appropriate to a circus but, here, deadly. And there was the wind. Why was he doing such a thing, why when they loved each other so much?
>
> At shore, Ariah leaned over an iron railing that dug into her waist and cried out to him in a raw, terrified voice. *Come back! I love you! You can't leave me!* (*TF* 120)

Ariah's vision mixes the image of Dirk's tightrope-walking ancestor with the loss of her first minister husband and her fear of the precariousness of her newfound happiness. However, though this episode is clearly a dream – her husband is sleeping soundly in her arms at the time – it takes on more psychic truth for Ariah than the fact of her husband's real life devotion and she becomes convinced that she is doomed to lose him. In fictional terms it is easy to dismiss this episode as simple foreshadowing, a hint to the reader of tragedy to come, and it certainly does serve this function. However, if Ariah is considered as a plausible consciousness, several questions may be raised. How "real" should the vision be considered? How should it be interpreted? Is it a simple coincidence that her irrational fear coincidentally came true? Or is her vision a form of psychic foresight? Did she doom her marriage to failure because she did not truly believe in it? Such borderline experiences at the frontier between the

real and the unreal are of prime importance in *The Falls* and contribute greatly to the open, fluctuating quality of the work.

1.1.3.3. Relativity of Evil

Characters in each of the corpus works struggle to understand why others treat them so cruelly. Gillian of *Beasts* is manipulated and molested by a couple she innocently admired. Alma Busch, the tattooed girl, claims to have no idea of why the men who held her captive and tattooed her did so. Teena Maguire of *Rape: A Love Story* experiences intense anguish because she cannot understand why anyone would want to hurt her. In these three examples, that which is perceived as antithetical to the self is regarded as suspicious and potentially "evil." In *The Falls*, however, due perhaps to the larger scope of this novel, the notion of evil is widened to encompass not just the motives of one or two individuals, but of a greater societal process.

A section of an early Oates novel which also includes a lawyer as one of the protagonists is preceded by an epigraph from Kafka: ". . . I am a lawyer. So I can never get away from evil."[162] Of the lawyer character from *Do With Me What You Will*, Burwell writes: "Now, contemplating the fate of his clients who blindly oppose an entrenched social and legal system, Jack thinks a self-defensive retreat might have been better."[163] A parallel with *The Falls* is easily drawn as Dirk Burnaby is another in a line of Oates characters who find themselves facing an entrenched system. In this Niagara Falls, the judge is friends with the powerful owners of the chemical companies who have ties to the mafia and have no qualms about bribing and threatening witnesses (*TF* 264). Thus, the type of evil that is foregrounded in the novel has to do with social corruption and injustice.

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[162] Joyce Carol Oates, *Do With Me What You Will* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1973) 167.
[163] Rose Marie Burwell, "The Process of Individuation as Narrative Structure: Joyce Carol Oates' *Do With Me What You Will,*" *Critique* 17.2 (1975): 103.

Nina Olshaker of *The Falls*, whose family is slowly being poisoned by unproperly disposed of chemicals in the soil on which their neighborhood is constructed, passionately exclaims "Oh, Mr. Burnaby! Why are people so *evil*?" (*TF* 229). This is a question to which there is apparently no response: "Her question was a legitimate one. Dirk Burnaby whose lucrative profession was words could not think of an answer" (*TF* 229-230). He reflects upon "the role of scientists, doctors, nurses, helpful managerial types, even teacher-types and (especially) legal-minded types" in such catastrophes as the Holocaust, atomic testing in Nevada, Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "The crude, cruel bullies, the born sadists, murderers, and executioners of the race, you could comprehend, but not these others. How to comprehend these others!" (*TF* 230). These others, many of which were "his kind." What Nina's plea fails to acknowledge, however, is the complexity of relationships involved in the creation of her family's situation which transcends the pure manichaean dichotomy of good and evil. Again, as in *Do With Me What You Will*, for the characters to survive, they must learn, in the words of Burwell, "that the world and the evil in it cannot be escaped or ignored, only encountered with self-knowledge and self-responsibility."[164] Indeed, this is the achievement of the Burnaby children in Part III, as will be discussed later on, and the viewpoint expressed by the character Joseph Pankowski, a holocaust concentration camp survivor:

> He said, "'Evil,' 'good' – what is this vocabulary? God allows evil for the simple reason that God makes no distinction between evil and good. As God makes no distinction between predator and prey. I did not lose my first, young family to evil but to human actions, and – only think! – a marvel of its kind, unspeakable! – the actions of lice, devouring them alive in the death camp. And so you must grant to God what is God and not try to think of what you have lost, for that way is madness." (*TF* 427)

Thus, evil, too, is a relative notion that cannot be separated from a unique viewpoint. As a label, therefore, it is not particularly helpful. As a process, however, as one component of a

[164] Burwell, "Process of Individuation" 104.

relationship, it invites reflection into the mystery of how people can impose conditions on others that they would not accept for themselves.[165]

Oates believes in the necessity of the quest for meaning. Concurrently, however, she believes that this meaning will always elude us: "When one believes he has the Truth, he is no longer an artist. When we finish a great work we should realize that we know less than we did before we began, in a sense, we are bewildered, confused, disturbed, filled with questions, ready to reread, unsettled by mystery" (*JJCO* 71-72). Indeed, *The Falls* raises some of the timeless questions of humanity. What importance should be granted to unconscious thoughts and impulses? How is it that love can have such toxic effects? Why are people so evil? Though providing no answer to the dilemmas it observes, the text does suggest that adaptability, and not rigidity, is the key to successfully navigating the confusing waters of the incomprehensible. The notion of the mutable self explored in this chapter through the relation of individual to family will be deepened in the next as Oates's complex construction of personality is explored through the multiple viewpoints of *The Tattooed Girl*.

[165] This parallels Oates's own belief. In a 2007 address, she tells a story about upsetting a number of people by a passing remark that she does not believe in evil: "Yesterday, [...] I inadvertently aroused the anger of a number of individuals who called in to protest my remark in passing that I did not believe in 'evil' – that I thought that 'evil' is a theological term, and not adequate to explain, nor even to suggest, psychological, social, and political complexities. When we label someone as 'evil' we are implicitly identifying ourselves as 'good.'" "'Why is Humanism Not the Preeminent Belief of Humankind?' Address Upon Receiving the 2007 Humanist of the Year Award," *In Rough Country* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010) 354.

Chapter II
The Tattooed Girl: The Case of the Girl No One Knew

In a review of a recent edition of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle,*[166] which she calls "Jackson's masterpiece of Gothic suspense," Oates touches on the issue of madness in relation to Merricat whom she identifies as an "isolated and estranged hypersensitive young-woman [protagonist]" who is "socially maladroit, highly self-conscious, and disdainful of others." For Oates:

> If Merricat is mad, it's a "poetic" madness like the madness of the young heroine of Jackson's *The Bird's Nest*, whose subdued personality harbors several selves, or the madness celebrated by Emily Dickinson – "Much Madness is divinest Sense - /To a discerning Eye - /Much Sense – the starkest Madness - /'Tis the Majority...." Her condition suggests paranoid schizophrenia in which anything out of the ordinary is likely to be threatening and all things are signs and symbols to be deciphered – "All the omens spoke of change."[167]

These observations about Merricat call to mind certain characteristics of Oates's tattooed girl, Alma Busch, who might also be described as "a mysterious amalgam of the childlike and the treacherous."[168] Discrepancy between inside and outside points of view are exploited in both Jackson's work and Oates's *The Tattooed Girl*. In spite of Merricat's turbulent behavior in Jackson's novel, her sister, Constance, never responds with more than the affectionate reproach "Silly Merricat." To the reader, this seems as inappropriate and displaced as Seigl's consideration of Alma as a nice working girl does in *The Tattooed Girl*. In this novel, as this

[166] Jackson's novel tells the story of Merricat, her older sister Constance and their uncle Julien who have lead a reclusive existence in the Blackwood family home since the rest of the family died of poisoning several years previous. These three make up a proud, tight-knit, well-ordered family unit inhospitable to the eyes of prying strangers. When the family poisoning occurred, police suspected Constance because she typically prepared the meals. However, the young, impetuous Merricat with her proclivity for proclaiming her knowledge of deadly poisons, her tendency towards witchcraft and her spiteful nature strikes the reader as a much more likely culprit. In spite of this family tragedy looming in their past, Merricat considers the three remaining Blackwoods to be living a perfectly enjoyable harmonious existence and has absolutely no desire to see it change. Things start spiralling out of control when a distant cousin shows up, wanting to change things, being rude to Uncle Julien and insinuating that he might like to marry Constance. Despite the turbulence caused by cousin Charles and a violent altercation with the townspeople, Merricat and Constance survive, retreating into an even more reclusive existence, though one with which they seem perfectly happy. Jackson's text ultimately reminds us how a fear of change and confrontation can lead to the rationalization of horrors and a potentially harmful acceptance, or perhaps embrace, of stasis, all the more insidious as it is presented as so pleasant to the two protagonists.
[167] Oates, "Witchcraft of Shirley Jackson."
[168] Oates, "Witchcraft of Shirley Jackson."

chapter will show, the structure foregrounds the multiple selves of the main characters and it is difficult to decide which ones should be considered as mad and which as sane. However, though the instability and incommensurability of the personality cause problems, they also provide possibilities for the evolution of the personality.

1.2.1. Phantasmagoria of Personality

"You can't help pitying the people who show up in the novels of Joyce Carol Oates. From the first page, you sense that they're going to be *known* to death, literally splayed by her insight," writes Ron Charles.[169] Yet, if Oates is able to evoke so vividly the mysteries of personality it is due to the depth of her consistent delving into characters who ultimately retain their elusivity. "A story always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality," states Flannery O'Connor.[170] Certainly Waller and Creighton would agree in relation to Oates's works. Both use the term "phantasmagoria of personality" in one of their chapter headings. Waller's second chapter "The Phantasmagoria of American Personality" discusses the intense struggle between inner selves and external reality that characterizes Oates's fiction leading him to claim that it "is the restlessness of the human personality itself" which unites "Oates's dream of America."[171] Waller views this vision of personality as intimately linked with the fact of violence, arguing that the combination of "surging psychic volatility" and the quest for significance frequently results, in her work, in eruptions of violence which symbolize "eruptions in the personality itself." For Waller, it is precisely the instability of personality as depicted in Oates that can lead to growth of selfhood and the possibility of redemption. As for Creighton, the scope of her fourth chapter entitled "The

[169] Ron Charles, "The widow bride of Niagara: In Joyce Carol Oates's latest novel, no one can resist the water," *The Christian Science Monitor* (14 September 2004).
[170] Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961) 90.
[171] Waller 40.

Phantasmagoria of Personality: Liberation through Love" is much narrower. She discusses the way in which "Oates begins to employ less conventional novelistic techniques," in *Wonderland* and *Do With Me What You Will*, "to develop the increased complexity of her characters and the density of her subject matter."[172] However, she associates the notion "phantasmagoria of personality" exclusively with positive aspects of the quest for selfhood such as personal development through the establishment of close relationships.

Is the personality so phantasmagoric that it can only be stabilized via the establishment of a link with the external world, in other words, with another personality? This idea is evoked near the beginning of *The Tattooed Girl*: "For a flawed soul yearns to be healed: in secular times, we require the stranger to complete us, where we lack the strength to complete ourselves. And so each time the doorbell rang, Seigl's foolish heart leapt."[173] Likewise, in a relatively early Oates story from 1975, "The Hallucination," the main character yearns for acknowledgement from others of questionable sanity. A young man who seems to be high on drugs and suffering hallucinations appears on Joanne and Alain's doorstep in the middle of the night, banging on the door to be let in. The incident reminds Joanne of two other times when she has witnessed boys in intense conversation with inanimate objects, prompting the following odd reflection:

> The two incidents returned to her now, gracefully fused. She had half-wished the boys had been in the same dimension with her, not so that they might be sane again – what value had that, when everyone was sane! – but so that they might interpret her. How did she look, to them? What contours had her face, what elegant ghastly proportions her slender body? And her eyes – transformed weirdly by a power she would never dare take on, herself – what beauty might they have, not known to her, and certainly not to her husband? This handsome, alarmed, impatient man who argued with her, this sensitive man whom responsibility had touched so subtly – only a few silvery, curly hairs, only a few slight indentations between his eyebrows – he too was transformed,

[172] Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 74.
[173] Joyce Carol Oates, *The Tattooed Girl* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003) 9. Hereafter abbreviated as *TTG*.

> something quite exotic and unknowable, but there was no way of seeing him, no way in.[174]

Joanne's reflection is pertinent to any discussion of personality. Might outsiders, in fact, be capable of seeing us more clearly than we see ourselves?[175]

In a 2004 interview with Michael Krasny, Oates spoke of herself as naturally sympathetic with people and excited to see the world from other points of view.[176] Indeed, the scope of characters whose viewpoints she has attempted to channel throughout her long career is impressive. In her *Journal,* she explains: "Living, we are forced to live out one role; give energy to one viewpoint. Which is why art is so seductive. The novelist fleshes out many viewpoints, and these viewpoints grow heads, arms and legs and bodies, take on life, take on life sometimes greedily and brutally" (*JJCO* 183). This desire to flesh out many viewpoints manifests itself from work to work as well as within many of the works themselves. Faced with the latent enigmatic nature of lived experience, Joyce Carol Oates frequently chooses to employ multiple viewpoint techniques to portray a denser multi-layered picture for her stories than that available using single viewpoints. In *The Falls*, for example, there are no less than six main focalizers – Gilbert Erskine, Ariah, Dirk Burnaby, Chandler, Royall and Juliet – and several minor ones including the Gatekeeper. *The Tattooed Girl*, under consideration in this chapter, has four: Joshua Seigl, Dmitri Meatte, Alma Busch and Jet Steadman Seigl. It is no wonder that the cobweb is a recurrent image throught the work, a theme that will be returned to later on. "My interest is in American life, in the various strata of power . . . the interplay of personalities . . . the places at which temporal and eternal apects of the self touch, wed, part, return," writes Oates (*JJCO* 66). Attempting to navigate this interplay one runs the risk, it seems, of becoming entangled.

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[174] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Hallucination," *All The Good People I've Left Behind* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1979) 98. This story originally appeared in *Chicago Review* 26.4 (1975).
[175] For more on this idea, see the discussion of Baurdrillard's concept of spectrality in Chapter 7. Baudrillard uses Simmel's concept of the stranger to explain why forms of mediatized, spectral communication have become so popular in contemporary culture.
[176] Michael Krasny, Online video interview with Joyce Carol Oates, San Francisco, (11 October 2004).

One challenge for the author, it seems, is in deciding how to tell a story when any one viewpoint (whether first or third person) is so decidedly flawed. No single "I" can completely know either himself or any single other, as she expresses in this passage from her journal:

> The puzzle of identity and personality! There isn't any adjective that I can apply to myself, or to anyone, with confidence. 'Adjectives' are simply fractured viewpoints . . . expressing only the viewer's response. . . . Shyness, boldness; indifference, warmth; vivacity, passivity; etc., etc. A veritable logjam of selves, and how to maneuver through them . . . how to navigate . . . negotiate. (*JJCO* 343)

The juxtaposition of several different views, even when they do not coincide, offers a more complete overall view. This complex layering provides perhaps a more realistic, although less tangible, comprehension of any narrated event.

Though the structure of *The Tattooed Girl* encourages us to think otherwise – introducing us first to Joshua Seigl through his search for an assistant and hinting at the possibility of his having a serious debilitating illness – it is Alma Busch, the eponymous tattooed girl, who is the central protagonist. She is the elusive personality whose choices drive the action and fuel the suspense. So much of the plot depends upon Alma, but who is she exactly and what does she represent? Immediately upon her arrival in the upscale neighborhood of Carmel Heights, "the tattooed girl, as she would be called by some observers" is identified as out-of-place, having "the look of flotsam that had floated up from the city below." The reader's first appreciation of her is filtered through the eyes of Dmitri Meatte whose "keen predator's senses were aroused" by the discovery of her (*TTG* 21). Dmitri keenly observes the "magenta, moth-shaped mark on her right cheek"[177] and deduces that this poor creature foraging for food at the outdoor café tables must have been used and subsequently abandoned by "unknown persons" (*TTG* 24). This misfortune, he astutely remarks, might be turned to his advantage: "Not a panicked feral creature, this sad-eyed girl,

[177] Interestingly, in Oates's 1982 story "Ghost Town" the character Mercy Holquist is described in the following way: "She was simple, she was endearing, yet disfigured by melodramatic ill-luck as if by a scarlet birthmark." Mercy also comes from an economically depressed mining region. *Literary Review* 25.4 (Summer 1982): 573.

but a domestic creature who has been beaten and traumatized but can be reclaimed." Assessing Alma as "a woman closer to thirty than sixteen" (*TTG* 27), Dmitri nevertheless considers her as an object which can be molded to his will, imagining her at various times as bread dough that can be kneaded, a fish that can be gutted (*TTG* 28) or as unresisting female meat that can be nudged in any direction (*TTG* 42) like the doll which her hair reminds him of (*TTG* 38). However, though Dmitri perhaps correctly discerns certain facts related to Alma's past, he incorrectly assesses the woman's essence. When he tries to make her into a prostitute, he is confronted with the stubbornness of her will to refuse: "It began to be, after a week, ten days, twelve days of his investment, she'd wake up sometimes not the Tattooed Girl but Alma, and Alma had her own way of behaving" (*TTG* 62).

Joshua Seigl appears, in many ways, as the exact opposite of Dmitri Meatte. Whereas Dmitri thinks of Alma as a woman and seeks to control her through the threat of violence, Seigl views her as a girl (*TTG* 84) and considers himself to be a sort of benevolent protector and teacher: "Seigl believed she'd become more confident, and in that way more intelligent, under his tutelage" (*TTG* 85). Seigl feels tenderness for this "slow-witted, plodding" (*TTG* 87) young woman, considering "what Alma Busch lacked in intelligence and education, she compensated for in warmth, generosity. Seigl sensed this" (*TTG* 94). To him, she appears as a hard working, devoted assistant (*TTG* 95) "labor[ing] to put his life in order" (*TTG* 106). He nevertheless has an ulterior motive. Faced with the future of a mysterious debilitating disease, Seigl hopes Alma will help rescue his "soul from oblivion" (*TTG* 89) and sees her more in the role of nurse than assistant (*TTG* 90).

Where is the "real" Alma Busch in all of this? Does she have her own "self" or does she exist only as a chameleon taking on the identities provided for her by one person or another? Alma's nickname comes from the fact that she has tattoos all over her body, "finely marked as with calligraphy, or embroidery" in "a filigree of magenta and dull red" (*TTG* 26).

She claims not to know the names of the men or man who did this to her, in fact, not to remember very much at all about what happened (*TTG* 29, 60). Alma Busch is someone who wears on her skin a symbol of her status as victim. Her curious tattooes visibly identify her as someone who has been manipulated and used. Both Dmitri Meatte and Joshua Seigl seek to continue this type of submissive relationship with her though we are tempted to view Dmitri's motives as immoral and Joshua Seigl's as noble. Dmitri is interested in Alma insofar as she can bring him monetary gain. When he fails to turn her into a satisfactory prostitute, he agrees to let her seek out her own employment, but she hands her earnings over to him. Seigl, on the other hand, is financially generous to Alma but, like Dmitri, intellectually condescending, though in a more subtle way. The girl is clearly not very well educated. The questions she puts to Seigl in the Book Seller – "You like books, though?" and "Had there been real witches?" (*TTG* 76, 78) – cause him to see her as incredibly naive, possibly another victim of "the ignorance and cruelty of history" like the witches of past centuries the two discuss (*TTG* 79). Seigl's spontaneous offer of employment appears to be the result of a complex mixture of class guilt and metaphysical desire. He attributes an almost mystical power to Alma and counts on her to do no less than "to SAVE MY LIFE" (*TTG* 83). He casts her in the role of devoted follower with himself as devotee: "Seigl was touched by his assistant's devotion: you would think, from Alma's rapt, slightly pained expression, that she was doing calculus, not minimal office-work. Or was she a temple virgin, in the service of a god" (*TTG* 95).

The reader would have a much different opinion of Alma Busch if the novel were narrated uniquely from Joshua Seigl's point of view as the tension created by the knowledge of Alma's conflicting thoughts and desires would be completely obscured. Instead, the shifting focalizers contribute to the creation of intrigue and introduce a note of irony into the narrative. Booth reminds his readers that "any sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator; inside views are thus

subject to variations [...] most importantly in the degree of unreliability."[178] Oates complicates the situation through the use of multiple inside views. In *The Tattooed Girl*, this technique makes it clear that no one character's viewpoint is completely trustworthy, creating tension in the reader who, privy to the overall view, is aware of problems that the characters themselves remain oblivious to. Alma begins working as Joshua Seigl's assistant at the beginning of Part II. The first two chapters are seen from Seigl's perspective and present the above-mentioned view of Alma as a diligent, loyal young employee. The first chapter told from Alma's perspective is not until the third chapter of the second part. It is here that this character begins to gather nuances. Alma, it turns out, remains under the influence of Dmitri Meatte whom she believes she loves; she plans to steal from Seigl in order to make Dmitri love her. Dmitri tells her that Seigl is a Jew and because Jews were "hated by everyone in Akron Valley where there weren't any but where they owned the mines" Alma decided "she would set her heart against the Jew though he had been kind to her and had not touched her" (*TTG* 100, 101). Seigl's naivety is emphasized when Alma gives us her point of view of an incident formerly recounted by Seigl – it turns out she DID know he was watching her, although he thought she did not – and we discover that on her first day she stole one of his letters (*TTG* 101, 104). She is confident she risks nothing: "(Was she worried that her employer would catch her or suspect her of searching his rooms? Hell, no. Seigl trusted his assistant so, she could be stealing him blind in front of his eyes and he'd only just smile at her saying, *Alma! Good morning*.)" (*TTG* 186). Thus, the Alma Busch of Part II appears to be very much a creature of Dmitri Meatte's conception. Presumably his crude behavior is similar to that with which she was familiar in her economically depressed home environment. It is clear that Alma does not have, at this point, her own voice. She acts only under the influence of others.

[178] Booth 164.

In another ironic twist, within the scholar's household, Seigl's crazy sister Jet is the only one to see Alma "clearly." From the beginning, Seigl portrays his sister as selfish and narcissistic; mythological metaphor enhances his ambivalent feelings for the woman whom he likens both to a harpy and a spider. She appears susceptible to violent personality swings and thus inspires similarly exaggerated reactions in others: "Jet had been the sort of child to squeeze a small pet to death, then weep inconsolably over the death. Seigl wasn't sure if he loved Jet. He was more certain, [*sic*] he feared the woman" (*TTG* 116-117). There is even a clinical diagnosis to prove his sister's mental instability: at one time, "she'd been diagnosed as 'latent paranoid schizophrenic'" (*TTG* 118), another time she is considered to have "an addictive personality" (*TTG* 132). Seigl ultimately recognizes that his sister's irrationality and unpredictability make her exceedingly dangerous: "For Jet was one who, after she'd behaved badly, blamed the person to whom she'd behaved badly for causing such uncharacteristic behavior in her" (*TTG* 135); herein may lie one of the keys for a satisfactory interpretation of the ending. Jet's motive in visiting Carmel Heights is ultimately revealed to be her desire to become her brother's assistant and so she, predictably, becomes angry when she sees Alma working with Seigl's papers. She accuses her brother of hiring this illiterate "creature" "deliberately to sabotage our heritage" and calls her an "idiot" who "speaks some sort of sub-English" (*TTG* 137). She is afraid Alma will lose, or worse, steal, manuscripts, or take money. Alma proves to be much more lucid about the sister than Seigl is about either of them: "She'd seen something in the Tattooed Girl's face and it was like she knew Alma was the enemy" (*TTG* 154). The two women understand each other perfectly. Jet's fears do prove justified as we witness Alma repeatedly stealing from Seigl and later attempting on several occasions to cause him bodily harm, though Seigl himself will never be aware of any of this.

Yet Alma's desire to harm Seigl is not brought to fruition in spite of her attempts and her loyalties eventually shift. By the end of Part III Seigl has explained to Alma that he is not

really a Jew because his mother was not Jewish and Alma has devotedly remained by his side throughout his hospitalization. Alma seems to have changed. When Dmitri finally shows up after a prolonged absence, Alma sends him away. Thus, Alma changes from conforming to Dmitri's vision to adopting Seigl's, but are either of these selves really her? Are Alma's different personas merely masks she adopts according to the appropriateness of each situation, or, rather, does her personality actually shift? Is she simply conforming to the image of a man who has offered to pay for her education, given her one of his mother's necklaces and made plans to take her with him to Rome in the fall, or has she actually evolved into a "better," less hateful person? The question is legitimate as the great majority of the novel is devoted to portraying Alma's crude, needy, vengeful personality.

Alma is from a poor-white background in the Akron Valley which she thinks of as Hell: "I am a child of Hell. I am an American and a child of Hell" (*TTG* 142). Accustomed to taking beatings from her father from a young age, she initially associates abuse and love. She remembers how as a teenager she let any of the boys have sex with her and abuse her, explaining "she felt the hurt as a child might feel desperate to be forgiven for whatever she must have done, to provoke such hurt" (*TTG* 192-193). As an adult she reproduces this pattern of behavior with Dmitri Meatte and his friends: "she loved it basking in their attention though such attention was fleeting as lighted matches and always there was a letdown later" (*TTG* 156). Aside from the two male protagonists, Alma appears to have no other close relations. Estranged from her family to whom she can never return because "she'd stolen from them, and they would never forgive her" (*TTG* 192), Alma has not seen her parents or her brothers since being disowned eight years previous (*TTG* 150, 188). Alma feels deeply this loss of connection with her family, thinking "*I am a child of Hell, I am lonely*" (*TTG* 187). The behavior patterns she engages in with men are the result of her desire to be loved.

Initially Dmitri Meatte offers her the type of relationship to which she has been accustomed and there is a sense of familiarity and belonging in this abuse. In his reading of Oates's short story "Four Summers," Keith Cushman portrays the main character in the following way: "Sissie above all needs to develop a sense of her own worth, but the story provides no way that this could have happened. The only patterns for emulation available to her are the blighted lives of her parents and their friends."[179] "Four Summers" portrays scenes from four different summer days in the life of Sissie which she spends at a lakeside tavern with her family. In the first, she is a toddler. In the second, elementary school age. In the third, she is a teenager of fourteen. Finally, in the fourth she is a nineteen-year-old pregnant newlywed. As an adult, Sissie reproduces her parents' behavior of drinking and despair because she is too afraid to change. Alma Busch is initially a Sissie-like character, surrounded by negative role models. However, Oates created Alma more than thirty years after Sissie. The shift that critics have observed in the treatment of Oates's female characters is evident in the possibility Alma is given to evolve. When Dmitri mysteriously disappears for a long period of time, Alma is once again left utterly alone and so must open herself up to Seigl. When she does so, she allows herself the experience of a different kind of relationship, one still based on mutual need, the manifestion of which is kindness rather than debasement and spite. Thus, Alma's selves evolve as the story unfolds. Although Seigl's original appreciation of Alma was "false," it is nevertheless this distorted vision that offers Alma the possibility of redemption. The tragic events of the novel's close come about because Jet is anchored in the past and her mentality does not allow for the possibility of evolution, but this in no way detracts from the positive process of transformation undergone by Alma. Rather, the contrast enhances our awareness of the transformation.

[179] Keith Cushman, "A Reading of Joyce Carol Oates's 'Four Summers,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 18.2 (Spring, 1981): 142. Originally published in *The Yale Review* (Spring 1967), "Four Summers" was collected in *The Wheel of Love* (New York: Vanguard, 1970).

1.2.1.1. At the Point of Metamorphosis

In an article discussing Oates's well-known short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and Joyce Chopra's film adaptation entitled "Smooth Talk," Brenda Daly compares and contrasts the different endings. The short story version retains an element of mystery and ambiguity which is absent from the film and its revised ending. In the film, the rape occurs and Connie is safe at home in the end, whereas in the short story the ending sees Connie finally agreeing to accompany Arnold Friend on his proposed drive so that we understand that Connie is driving off to her rape and murder. According to Daly, "Oates's non-ending is [...] 'unfilmable,' for it portrays an energy – an erotic, spiritual energy signalled by violence – that cannot finally, be contained by a work of art."[180] Thus, the film's revised ending significantly alters the authorial vision communicated by the short story's lack of closure. Daly's comments on Oates's ending are interesting for this discussion of *The Tattooed Girl* because her reading of Connie seems equally pertinent to Oates's later female protagonist. Daly insists that Oates "views the human personality as fluid"[181] and cites a passage from one of the author's essays on Yeats in which she compares "the primitive imagination" and its acceptance of "the fact of miraculous change" to what she terms "the more commonplace and sanitary beliefs in the permanent isolation of human beings from one another and from the world of nature." Daly's interpretation of Oates's ending is that "Oates's thought [...] is similarly 'primitive,' presenting Connie at the point of metamorphosis from one state of being to another, from one consciousness to another." Indeed, fictional clues indicate that in accepting her fate, Connie undergoes a shift to a higher level of consciousness. Daly praises Oates for suggesting the mystery of this higher consciousness "by the use of a

[180] Brenda O. Daly, "An Unfilmable Conclusion: Joyce Carol Oates at the Movies," *Journal of Popular Culture* 23.3 (Winter 1989): 112.
[181] Daly, "Unfilmable Conclusion" 111.

question in her title, 'Where are you going, where have you been?' and in the ambiguous conclusion of her story."[182]

Although the ending of *The Tattooed Girl* is much less ambiguous as far as the fate of the main character is concerned, significant parallels may be drawn between the two stories. The fact that Alma dies at the end of the novel, like the fate assuredly reserved for Connie in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," in no way revokes the fact that she did change, evolving to a higher level of selfless being. Jet, on the other hand, is alive but remains ensnared in the trappings of her obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Both Alma's and Connie's fates point to the stasis of a society that is unwilling to accept change. If Alma and Connie are parallel characters, then their parallel counterparts are Jet and Connie's mother. These two women may be read as representing the pull of society to resist change in favor of the known, no matter how flawed. Rather than adapt their outdated codes to new situations, both characters insist on anachronistically applying these codes to an incongruous present. Connie's mother, claims Daly, is bogged down in an old conventional morality about women and sex.[183] Likewise, Jet's obsession with Alma's immoral motivations signals her place within a traditional static society at pains to accept the possibility of personal evolution. By the end of the novel, Alma has become a changed person and embraced a positive relationship with Seigl. However, Jet refuses to adapt her first impression of the other woman.

1.2.1.2. Eyes That Do Not See

Defective eyes and blurry vision are frequent indicators of comprehension problems in Oates's characters. *The Tattooed Girl* in particular employs this motif to an almost excessive degree, as might be expected in the wake of the preceding discussion. "For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually

[182] Daly, "Unfilmable Conclusion" 112.
[183] Daly, "Unfilmable Conclusion" 104.

involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it," writes Flannery O'Connor.[184] I have already touched upon the idea that the world is inherently enigmatic even for those with the clearest vision, as the unanswerable metaphysical questions of philosophy can attest to. If we grant then that the senses, and sight in particular, represent the gateway through which our perception of the world occurs, faulty vision only serves to exacerbate comprehension difficulties.

Through the example of Alma Busch, notably the ways in which she is considered by the other characters and the ways her personality shifts over time, the preceding section has shown how Oates portrays the unstable nature of personality and the difficulty of fathoming the personality of another. Seigl presumably "sees" the same objective things as Dmitri and Jet when he looks at Alma, but he chooses to interpret the information differently. Alma acknowledges that Seigl is kind to her whereas Dmitri is abusive and negligent, however, she chooses to align herself with the familiar, with that which she has "seen" before.

Joshua Seigl has constant problems with impaired vision. Initially presented as a hazard of his profession – "The computer screen had begun to dazzle Seigl's eyes" (*TTG* 6) – the problem is worsened by his illness; he must take a "steroid-based medication" which will most certainly cause "blurred vision" (*TTG* 86-87). This is the state of Seigl's vision when his employer/employee relationship with Alma begins. An observation by Alma that she feels "his strange black shiny eyes like marbles moving onto her" further enhances the idea that he cannot properly see her (*TTG* 101). In Part III, when Alma is actively attempting to sabotage him, Seigl's vision is described as having further deteriorated. Even on not so bad days "his eyesight was annoyingly blurred even with his glasses" (*TTG* 247), on other days one could identify a "haunted look in his eyes" (*TTG* 258), and "on the worst of the bad days he remained in bed, unable to walk and complaining of double vision" (*TTG* 231-232). When he

[184] O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories" 91.

is well enough to go outside, his eyes are bothered as well: "Seigl's eyes smarted from the strong bright light. Sometimes, the vividness and vibrancy of the outer world, including too the world of other people, assaulted the brain like pelting needles" (*TTG* 218).

Alma, who initially allies herself with Dmitri Meatte against Seigl, also has problems with her eyes. When confronted with uncomfortable, uncontrollable, uncomprehensible situations her eyes appear to cease functioning properly. For example, when addressed by Seigl in the Book Seller, she "turned blank blinking eyes toward" him (*TTG* 74) and when she is instructed on her first day of work "she looked about the room with moist, rapidly blinking eyes" (*TTG* 89) that are fringed by "tremulous eyelids" (*TTG* 90) and are oddly colored: "Her eyelids had a bluish, bruised tinge, and there were bluish shadowy hollows beneath her eyes. No disguising the truth of the eyes" (*TTG* 91). However, what this truth is supposed to be remains unclear. Much later, when Alma and Seigl have their discussion about the Holocaust, which Alma has been taught by her family and by Dmitri to disbelieve, Seigl describes her eyes as "literally blind, the eyes of an undersea creature, nourished by darkness" and when she does not know what to say, her eyes once again blink "rapidly" (*TTG* 249, 250).

As another Oates story, "Mistaken Identity," points out, everyone can be inspired to do uncharacteristic things and even the most lucid people may express contentment and relief at knowing life remains temporarily unchanged. In this story, a woman follows a man she takes to be her husband, suspecting him of having an affair – "So in the frigid dusk-like dawn of the wintry city there was K., a young woman of integrity, a young woman of pride, and self-respect, who abhorred hypocrisy, and never lied – there was K. following G. in her car"[185] – but when the man she is following turns out to be a complete stranger, she cannot contain her elation: "How happy she was, suddenly: whatever was to happen, it had not happened yet."[186] Indeed, the meaning behind the uncharacteristic behavior of the characters in *The Tattooed*

[185] Joyce Carol Oates, "Mistaken Identity," *New England Review* 15.4 (Fall 1993): 62.
[186] Oates, "Mistaken Identity" 65.

Girl, like that of the heroine of "Mistaken Identity," is never relieved of its ambiguity. Part I Chapter 3 recounts the arrival of the Tattooed Girl in Carmel Heights. Narrated from an omniscient third person point of view, the chapter concludes:

> An improvident tide would seem to have lifted her to Carmel Heights and deposited her here as a river, after a flood, retreating from its banks, deposits debris in its wake.
> Amid such debris, it requires a sharp yet patient eye to discern treasure. (*TTG* 21-22)

To whom, one wonders, do the words "eye" and "treasure" refer? The latter undoubtedly refers to the Tattooed Girl as the chapter is about her arrival in the community, however, it is unclear whether the use is ironic or literal and whether the value of the treasure applies to an inherent chracteristic or rather the perception of a quality by an outsider. As the following chapter is narrated from the point of view of Dmitri Meatte and begins "immediately, his keen predator's senses were aroused," the immediate response to this inquiry is to understand the expression as referring to the use to which Dmitri believes he can put Alma. However, as the story develops, one wonders at Seigl's appreciation of the woman. Was his treatment of her just a lucky mistake, or did he actually perceive, unconsciously perhaps, treasure under her flawed surface? Likewise, Alma's relationship to Dmitri also remains unsatisfactorily ambiguous. When Dmitri first addresses her "the girl lifted her head and stared at him. She had mineral eyes threaded with tiny broken capillaries. Junkie eyes, maybe. Or the eyes of one who is exhausted" (*TTG* 26). After this initial encounter, one first imagines that the girl/woman's defective vision prevents her from sensing the danger presented by Dmitri Meatte. Later developments, however, force a reevaluation of this too-convenient analysis when the kindred pasts of the two are revealed. The truth, though, must lie somewhere in between, as Alma's later choices imply; she comes from a background, after all, as the description of houses in her community implies, where most people cannot be troubled to worry about seeing clearly: "Over their windows people taped polyethylene sheeting to save

on fuel. It's too much trouble to take the sheeting down in the spring so the windows are permanently covered. Like glaucoma-clouded eyes" (*TTG* 144).

Finally, representatives of the established order are portrayed as having the impaired vision with the most drastic effects. Jet is the upper class representative bent on safeguarding the family's heritage. To this end she is intransigent, an intransigence likened to madness as the comparison of her to a basilisk, a mythological creature with a lethal gaze, indicates: "Seigl could envision his sister's golden basilisk eyes. The madness shining like liquid flame in those eyes" (*TTG* 106). Along the same lines, when Seigl is dead, leaving a significant inheritance to Alma, and his family and friends are suspicious of her role in the events surrounding the accident, the lawyer, Crossman, is perceived by Alma as "a stone head with eyeglass-eyes regard[ing] her with cool civility" (*TTG* 292), indicating once again the intransigence of class lines which Oates's fiction denounces.

Thus, whereas there can be no doubt about the level of vision impairment in each of the characters, a difference is apparent in their treatment of and eventual acceptance of the problem. As the following sections will show, Seigl and Alma both struggle in their own ways with the night-sides of their selves and ultimately achieve a sort of redemption due to their opening up to the possibility of connections. Jet and the other members of her conventional social order, represented by various characters in Part IV such as the unspecified relatives, the police and the lawyer, remain entrenched in the folly of their intransigent attitudes, ultimately succumbing to their unacknowledged repressed night-sides.

1.2.2. The "Night Side" of Our Lives

Oates's story "Night-Side," collected in the volume of the same title, is set in Massachusetts in 1887 and takes the form of journal entries recorded by Jarvis Williams about several disturbing psychic research phenomena he and his colleague Perry Moore experienced

together. Moore is described as "an empiricist who accepts nothing on faith," a man with "a positive love, a mania, for facts."[187] He believes that telepathy can be the only possible explanation for the spiritualist phenomenon and that science will eventually prove this to be the case: "'It's done in a way not understood by science at the present time. But it will be understood eventually. Our investigations into the unconscious powers of the human mind are just beginning; we're on the threshold, really, of a new era'" (*NS* 15). The narrator is initially a little more open-minded. After a particularly disturbing session with Mrs. A, a medium, he jots down the possible explanations for the event: 1) Mrs. A is a fraud, 2) she is not a fraud and her power is naturalistic (telepathy), 3) she is not a fraud and her power is spiritualistic (actual communication with spirits), or, 4) the events can be explained through an alternative hypothesis, that of madness on the parts of everyone involved (*NS* 16-17). The particularly disturbing experience Williams refers to involves an encounter with a "spirit" that succeeded in converting his companion to the spiritualist cause. Moore, the empiricist, enthusiastically embraces spiritualism:

> There *are* spirits! There have always been spirits!
> His entire life up to the present time has been misspent!
> And of course, most important of all – there is no death! (*NS* 20)

Oates has expressed her belief that William James is "our greatest American philosopher" (*JJCO* xiv).[188] As the story takes place in James's time and setting, it comes as no surprise to find the character William James among the cast of "Night-Side." The narrator spends an afternoon "talking with Professor James of the inexplicable phenomenon of consciousness" (*NS* 24). Much of this curious fictional encounter sheds light on the

[187] Joyce Carol Oates, *Night-Side* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1977) 15. Hereafter abbreviated as *NS*.
[188] For a discussion of Oates as a pragmatist in the tradition of William James, see the introduction to Cologne-Brookes' *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*. "Her reflections on American society," writes Cologne-Brookes, "dovetail with and develop convictions evident in the writings of founding pragmatists, of those who influenced them, of later pragmatists such as John Dewey, and of contemporary commentators like Richard Rorty and Charlene Haddock Seigfriend" (2). These convictions involve, explains Cologne-Brookes, "a belief in the possibilities of social change. The pragmatist believes that, even if we accept language as a work of art in itself, and so an imperfect medium that leaves meanings open and plural, what counts are the practical consequences of what we write, say, or do" (3-4).

phenomenon of personality that has been preoccupying the discussion in this chapter and thus merits extensive citation:

> James speaks of a *peculiarity* in the constitution of human nature: that is, the fact that we inhabit not only our ego-consciousness but a wide field of psychological experience (most clearly represented by the phenomenon of memory, which no one can adequately explain) over which we have no control whatsoever. In fact, we are not generally aware of this field of consciousness.
>
> We inhabit a lighted sphere, then; and about us is a vast penumbra of memories, reflections, feelings, and stray uncoordinated thoughts that "belong" to us theoretically, but that do not seem to be part of our conscious identity. (I was too timid to ask Professor James whether it might be the case that we do not inevitably own these aspects of the personality – that such phenomena belong as much to the objective world as to our subjective selves.) It is quite possible that there is an element of some indeterminate kind: oceanic, timeless, and living, against which the individual being constructs temporary barriers as part of an ongoing process of unique, particularized survival; like the ocean itself, which appears to separate islands that are in fact no "islands" at all, but aspects of the earth firmly joined together below the surface of the water. Our lives, then, resemble these islands. . . . All this is no more than a possibility, Professor James and I agreed.
>
> [...]
>
> He maintains a healthy skepticism, of course, regarding Spiritualist claims, and all evangelical and enthusiastic religious movements, though he is, at the same time, a highly articulate foe of the "rationalist" position and he believes that psychical research of the kind some of us are attempting will eventually unearth riches – revealing aspects of the human psyche otherwise closed to our scrutiny.
>
> "The fearful thing," James said, "is that we are at all times vulnerable to incursions from the 'other side' of the personality. . . . We cannot determine the nature of the total personality simply because much of it, perhaps most, is hidden from us. . . . When we are invaded, then, we are overwhelmed and surrender immediately. Emotionally charged intuitions, hunches, guesses, even ideas may be the least aggressive of these incursions; but there are visual and auditory hallucinations, and forms of automatic behavior not controlled by the conscious mind. . . . Ah, you're thinking I am simply describing insanity?" (*NS* 24-25)

This scene calls to mind the passage from the afterword to *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* in which Oates writes of the intangible reality of various states of mind. Furthermore, the "William James" of Oates's story recalls the "real" William James who developed the theory of the stream of consciousness: "Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is

most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life*" (James's emphasis). James's concept of the "fringe" which he develops in the same essay parallels the notion of the "other side" of the personality evoked in the above passage from Oates's story. Continuing with his metaphor of the stream, James describes the "fringe" as the "free water of consciousness":

> Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it, - or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same *thing* it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.[189] (James's emphasis)

"Night-Side" comes to a close after another disturbing occurrence in which Moore's spirit seems to be attempting to communicate with Williams during a dream. Whereas Moore had responded to his psychic encounter by enthusiastically embracing the possibility of the spirit realm, this later encounter has the opposite effect on his friend who takes the experience as a reaffirmation of real life. Williams reflects: "Life is the only reality. It is not extinction that awaits but a hideous dreamlike state, a perpetual groping, blundering – far worse than extinction – incomprehensible: so it is life we must cling to, arm over arm, swimming, conquering the element that sustains us" (*NS* 32). He thinks of his children calling out to him "from the dayside of the world that they inhabit" (*NS* 33). By the story's close, the two central protagonists have traded places in a sense: Moore has shifted from intransigent empiricist to intransigent Spiritualist; Williams from open-minded researcher to close-minded realist. However, the two men are at all times obsessed with the question of knowing. What is particularly interesting about this story, however, is that Williams's use of the expression "dayside" and James's of "lighted sphere" allow us by contrast to develop a vision of what is meant by the "night-side" indicated in the title, though the expression is not employed in the

[189] William James, "The Stream of Consciousness," *Psychology* (Cleveland & New York, World, 1892), *Classics in the History of Psychology* website 3.

story itself. The "night-side" therefore is that realm of the personality home to memories, reflections, feelings and from which intuitions, hunches, guesses, visual and auditory hallucinations, and automatic behavior arise. In this way, the empiricist/spiritualist distinctions adhered to by the two central protagonists of the story cause them to completely miss the lesson to be learned by an acceptance of the "night-side" which is that there are certain aspects of the personality that will never be completely understood. Night-side and day-side are complementary parts of a whole and both must be accepted. Oates's concepts of the night-side and the day-side of the personality can also be understood in terms of William James's concept of the fringe which he explains as being comprised of multiple "waxing and waning brain-processes" which "at every moment blend with and suffuse and alter the psychic effect of the processes which are at their culminating point." Similarly, the night-side and the day-side may be understood as conjunctive phenomena, continuously waxing and waning between culminating points. They blend together, their exact nature remains mysterious, for, as James writes of the processes of consciousness, "just like 'overtones' in music: they are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it."[190]

The "night side" of our lives is one aspect of the phantasmagoric personality discussed by Waller in relation to Oates: "It is from our dreams, visions, and the inexplicable passion of our emotions and desires that our most crucial insights arise. If we fear and repress this 'night side' of our lives, then indeed we distort ourselves."[191] This, in turn, is ultimately related by Waller to the author's conception of psychological realism:

> Counteracting the poverty, violence, and mobility of her America is a tone of celebration based on an awareness that the inner landscape – the human personality and its dreams and desires – is what creates the external world. She has described herself as a 'psychological realist,' which she explains as taking

[190] W. James, "The Stream of Consciousness" 3.
[191] Waller 32.

> 'the area of the human psyche, or mind, as the centre of all experience of reality.'"[192]

Oates's story "Assault" tells of a young professional woman who suffered a brutal assault in her past.[193] After waking from a dream about her rapist, she is initially frightened at hearing someone outside. However, when she investigates at daylight and finds evidence of a lovers' tryst, she is overcome with feelings of benevolence and connectedness. As Eileen Bender explains in her reading of this story: "the heroine moves beyond the realm of egoistic combat; relaxing intellectual control, she is cleansed of the self-hatred that characterizes so many of Oates' uneasy heroines. Ultimately, she is reborn, able not only to recreate 'ordinary' reality, but to embrace it, becoming her own author."[194] It is the unique combination of night-side and day-side at work in this character's experience that brings about her process of change.

Night-side experiences also contribute to feelings of ontological insecurity in the characters of *The Tattooed Girl*, dramatizing, in the words of Bender, "the threat of ontological insecurity that hounds the most protean and resilient human quarry."[195] The novel's short opening chapter indicates that Seigl is occupying a boundary zone between two different modes of existence and feeling unsure about the change:

> He had known it must happen soon. And yet he wasn't prepared for it happening so soon.
> "I can't do it any longer. No more."
> He meant, but could not bring himself to acknowledge, *I can't live alone any longer*. (*TTG* 3)

The next page of the novel begins:

> *Easy is the way down into the Underworld: by night and by day dark Hades' door stands open* . . . He smiled at these lines of Virgil floating into

[192] Waller 41.
[193] Joyce Carol Oates, "Assault," *The Goddess and Other Women* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1976) 432-456.
[194] Eileen T. Bender, "Between the Categories: Recent Short Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in Short Fiction* 17.4 (Fall 1980): 423.
[195] Bender, "Between the Categories" 423.

> consciousness like froth on a stream. He told himself he wasn't frightened: his soul was tough as the leather of his oldest boots. (*TTG* 4)

Thus, turning the page is like opening a door that plunges us immediately into Seigl's "night-side." The reference to the underworld also recalls Dirk Burnaby's involvement with the fateful Olshaker case in *The Falls*, an occurrence which is also linked to the notion of a gradual detachment from the external reality of one's life. Faced with the prospect of his slow physical decline, Seigl retreats more and more from the world and into his own mental space. He shies away from hiring an assistant with a prior knowledge of his reputation and decides not to tell his friends about the neurological tests. Even for a relatively unsociable person like Seigl, this behavior has its downside:

> For Seigl, desperate not to be found out, just yet, by the community, still more by his relatives, had become inordinately secretive. He'd never shared secrets readily, kept his private life private, but now he was becoming parenthetical: he felt like an eclipsed moon. He was still there, but you couldn't see him. (*TTG* 69)

In fact, Seigl's illness has contributed to a loss of sense of self. His fall while running in the cemetery also shattered his fragile ego, sending him reeling through a psychic space in which he can no longer find his bearings:

> Since that time, Seigl's entire sense of himself had changed. He felt that every molecule had changed. There was matter and anti-matter in the universe, and he'd taken for granted that, being an American born in 1964 of well-to-do parents, he was *matter*, and he *mattered*. Now, he understood that he was becoming *anti-matter*. (*TTG* 69-70)

Prowling the Book Seller before his encounter with Alma, Seigl reflects on his fall in the cemetery, the inconclusive medical tests and his unvoiced fear that he has not much longer to live. He picks up an edition of Seneca's *Epistles* from which he reads "*The wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can*" and "*Every man ought to make his life acceptable to others, but his death to himself alone*" (*TTG* 68, 69). His proposal to Alma shortly after would suggest that he has unconsciously chosen to start living his death for himself.

Oates has written some of herself into her fictional character. Seigl's habit of "scribbling notes to himself in a fever of concentration even as he was being introduced to speak before large audiences, and glancing up startled by applause" (*TTG* 83) is one of her habits as well. In addition, as writers of fiction, both have the power of delving into the minds of their characters. Seigl is the author of one novel which sounds strikingly like it could be one of Oates's own: "In *The Shadows* he'd dared to follow his grandparents Moses and Rachel Seigl into the gas chamber at Dachau, and by slow and then rapid degrees into death as their terrified brains, battling extinction, snatched at memories" (*TTG* 179).[196] This description can be read in parallel as both Seigl's reaction to his own illness and Oates's authorial treatment of her character.

The physical symptoms of Seigl's illness have a parallel effect on his psychological well-being. Unless it is the opposite. Indeed, the two seem to be hopelessly intertwined. In explaining his situation to Alma, Seigl shows her boxes of letters to which he has never replied, saying "'It's like a nightmare, voices calling to me, strangers' voices, appealing to me and wanting something from me and a kind of paralysis comes over me . . .' Seigl heard the words he was uttering with horror" (*TTG* 93). In addition to the physical effects it has on his body, Seigl's illness seems to have the additional effect of opening wide the communicating psychic door between conscious and unconscious realms. Seigl's apparent inability to control his flow of words is another example of what Waller refers to as "the sudden eruption of fearful or unexpected events through apparently realistic surfaces."[197] Yet this "eruption" is not to be construed as uniquely negative. While it does, on the one hand, indicate a slightly unsettling loss of control, it also has a liberating nature. When Seigl leaves his assistant and sits down to work after his emotional outburst "already he was feeling calmer, optimistic. / He'd broken through the paralysis of months. Years!" (*TTG* 93). Later on, speaking to his

[196] Oates has also used her grandparents' lives as inspiration for stories. The main character in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* is inspired by her grandmother.
[197] Waller 27.

sister, Seigl explains: "Nerves quite literally fray in some people" (*TTG* 121). Clearly, both the literal and figurative applications of this expression are equally viable in his case. Whereas Seigl seems to feel that his illness is the result of physical forces attacking his conscious self, his sister turns the logic around, accusing him of making himself sick, of sabotaging the family: "'Denial is a form of hysteria, like catatonia. You're deeply into denial, Joshua. Your career is in tatters and you don't seem to care. This 'autoimmune' condition: it's your own self turning against you. But in destroying yourself you're destroying others, too. The memory of our family. Our heritage'" (*TTG* 138). The "truth" is nowhere to be found, especially as the precise nature of Seigl's disease remains unidentified. Furthermore, the reader is hindered in his assessment by certain constraints imposed by the narrative structure: first, that the only information available is that which has been filtered through one or another of the character's personalities, and second, that the novel's timeline only covers the period of Seigl's illness, meaning there is no access to the time before he became ill that may serve as comparison. One can simply observe the overwhelming intermingling of night-side revenants with the day-side goings on of the struggling personality.

Alma Busch is also a creature of the night-side. Tormented by resurgent memories of the countless injustices of her past, the isolated Alma is not strong enough to resist giving in to the spiteful impulses provoked by her encounters with the hostile outer world. For example, when the sales personnel make her feel unwelcome and out of place in Carmel Heights clothing stores, she finds no other outlet for her anger than to conform to their negative image:

> They were reluctant to let her try on clothes as if fearing she would damage or contaminate anything that touched her skin and sometimes in her rage she made certain she smeared lipstick onto a collar, or jammed a zipper, or wiped a patch of material between her legs or in the crack of her ass, biting her lip to keep from laughing. (*TTG* 191)

Yet, she does not fully assume responsibility for these actions, does not recognize herself as the author. According to Alma, the responsibility for her behavior lies with those that

provoked it. The above passage continues: "And catching sight of her swollen-looking white face and defiant red mouth in the distending convex mirror above the cashier's counter she would think, trembling with indignation, *That isn't me, that's somebody they made me be*" (*TTG* 191).[198] This same logic is applied to her harmful behavior towards Seigl who has provoked it by the simple fact of having a Jewish last name.

All that is known of Alma's background is either forced out of her by prying questions, as when Dmitri Meatte interrogates her about the origin of her tattooes, or presented in the form of painful memories. Part II, Chapter 15 is a good example of the latter. In this passage, Alma is alone in her room in Seigl's house, "listless at 2 A.M. turning the pages of a book" (*TTG* 187). The narrative constantly shifts back and forth without warning between passages relating present thoughts and description, and past memories and feelings. Alma thinks about her nightie which is stained with menstrual blood but dismisses the fact as insignificant because no one can see her. This leads her to think about the past: "So they'd fucked up her life, those guys she'd trusted, for fun. What the hell" (*TTG* 186). Immediately after, her attention is called back to the book she is looking through, which reminds her of "nasty comic book[s] her brothers had showed her when she was five or six" (*TTG* 187). Following these thoughts, the narrative returns to a description of Alma propped up on her bed. Her thoughts turn to her relationship with her employer, then to that with Dmitri and then back to the book, the book about witches that she had interrogated Seigl about in the bookstore and that he had subsequently presented her as a gift. Alma seems to feel a particular attraction for a certain "Jehane de Brigue," a French woman accused of witchcraft in the fourteenth century. Alma shares the realization of one who is in a vulnerable position, thinking: "Once you were accused, there could be no escape. For you would be tortured until you confessed, and when

[198] Seigl also has a mirror face that reminds him of the duality of his existence: "Chastising his mirror-face. A lewd winking expression like a mask of Pan had slipped over it. He made a kissing-sucking noise with his lips. Hot with blood, rather full, fleshy, Seigl's lips reminded him of, of what, reminded him of genitalia, thin membranous skin rosily cast with blood . . . He laughed. He wiped at his mouth. Well, it was so. Why deny it!" (*TTG* 164).

you confessed you would be executed. And anyone could accuse you. And you could accuse anyone" (*TTG* 189). The memories that follow draw up a sort of parallel with Alma's life in which she has found it easier to simply comply with others' expectations of her, letting herself be used until she cannot take it anymore and explodes with a burst of violence.

Like Seigl, Alma is frequently not in full control of her thoughts and actions. Out of her tortured night-side rises the desire to kill her Jew employer. As this intense thought comes to her unbidden, so the acts she engages in towards this end seem to come about not fully consciously. During the crushed-glass-in-casserole incident,[199] Alma is described as watching herself as if her consciousness is detached from her body which is acting mechanically: "She was watching her hands now. [...] Alma saw her hands slyly wrapping the dish towel around the water glass and she saw her hands smash the glass, safely wrapped in the towel, against the sink. [...] / Alma laughed aloud, nervously. What was this?" (*TTG* 201-202). Indeed, if questioned, Alma would probably not be able to coherently explain her motives, hints the text: "The humiliation, for the Tattooed Girl, of that birthday party. [*sic*] But even at the time, in the depth of her misery, here in this same kitchen the Tattooed Girl had not thought *I will revenge myself for this: I will kill the man who has insulted me*" (*TTG* 202). The circumstances are similar later on when Alma collects used tissues from a pew at the Lutheran church to take home and steep in her employer's tea: "She saw her mittened hands gathering wadded tissues" (*TTG* 235). The challenge for these characters is not to give in to the night-side of the personality but to find a way to balance this mysterious realm with the more tangible day-side aspects of life.

[199] Alma Busch is not the first Oates character to envisage this means of committing murder. Hilda Pedersen of *Wonderland* also went so far as to smash a glass, though she did not actually go through with mixing it into her father's food: "Did he know about her secret self, which was not his daughter at all or even a female? Did he know about the self that held back from him, that plotted against him? – she had even smashed a water glass once, wrapped in a towel, with the idea of grinding the glass down fine to put into his food, to kill him!" Cited by Pinsker, "Hungering for Personality" 64.

1.2.3. Change and Redemption

"What love, even in its fear, violence and pain, brings to each of us is that through the terror, through the very vulnerability of the personality, we may realize that it is our very openness to change that finally makes for our redemption."[200] Waller's general statement about Oates's early novels has not lost any of its import when read in connection with later novels such as *The Tattooed Girl*. Indeed, the process of change and redemption is central to this work though Oates is careful not to present it as a panacea.

Of the final story "What is the Connection Between Men and Woman?" in Oates's collection *The Wheel of Love*, Brenda Daly writes: "Opening one's self is always a risk, the story implies, but such risks are necessary."[201] As shown in the previous section, Seigl is heavily under the influence of the night-side of his personality throughout the whole of *The Tattooed Girl*, an influence which inspires him to open himself up to uncharacteristic experiences and deny the conventional "us and them" attitude perpetuated by people of his education and social class.[202] His relationship with Alma Busch is made possible by his engagement in unconventional behavior brought on by his developing illness. In this instance, the risk turns out to be well-calculated and Seigl dies knowing that he has helped one person regain her sense of self-worth. In this way, Oates's fiction might also be seen as employing the sort of "healing words" that Huey Guagliardo has found to "offer a kind of secular redemption from human loneliness and alienation" in Richard Ford's fiction.[203]

The notions of change and rebirth become a recurring refrain in *The Tattooed Girl*. Waiting for Alma to arrive for her first day of work, Seigl cannot help thinking:

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[200] Waller 48.
[201] Brenda Daly, "Sexual Politics in Two Collections of Joyce Carol Oates's Short Fiction," *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995): 85.
[202] William DeGenaro uses and develops the expression "the 'us and them' attitude" in his article "Us and Them: Joyce Carol Oates and the Stories Students Tell," *Teaching English in the Two Year College* 34.4 (May 2007): 380-393.
[203] Huey Guagliardo, "Walker Percy, Bruce Springsteen, and the Quest for Healing Words in the Fiction of Richard Ford," *The Journal of American Culture* 25.3-4 (September 2002): 424.

> My heart is filled with HOPE.
> I seem to know: this is REBIRTH.
> I seem to know: this is an act to SAVE MY LIFE. (*TTG* 83)

The capital letters emphasize the strength of the emotions felt by the character and convey an almost religious quality upon the words. Seigl realizes that his friends and acquaintances will disapprove of his new assistant and label his choice "odd behavior," yet he decides not to worry about being identified as odd in the eyes of others and places the importance on his personal feelings about Alma's "warmth" and "generosity" (*TTG* 94). This blatant indifference indicates a conscious shift in values. Seigl wholeheartedly embraces the idea of change in his life, looking forward to the symbolic turn of the year, anticipating further developments in the process: "In the New Year, much would be changed" (*TTG* 145). This line becomes the refrain for Part II, Chapters 7, 8 and 9, rallying Seigl to encourage an even closer relationship between himself and his assistant.

Seigl opens himself up to the possibility of a different relationship. Alma, too, must do this if she is to evolve. The basis of this character's relational problems is evoked in her response to Seigl and his guests at the dinner party:

> Alma was dismayed, her employer had so many friends. And they were women as well as men, some of them older, a few younger. Some were very attractive individuals but others were plain and dumpy and some were homely. Why'd anyone like them, much? Who were they? [...] All this mystified Alma. She hated it, she was made to feel so stupid. [...] Why did they like one another so much, and why did Seigl like them? [...] She was sick with jealousy. She could not grasp this mystery. [...]
>
> *Why did people care for one another, where there was no sex connection?* That was the mystery. Except that she was crazy for Dmitri Meatte, Alma feared and disliked him, and could never be a friend to him. If he ceased utterly to want her, she would wish him dead. (*TTG* 212-213)

Thus the challenge for Alma is in accepting the idea of friendship, in establishing a relationship with someone that is not based on sexual submission but rather on the premise of equal exchange.

The process is not an easy one; Seigl and Alma both struggle with their relationship. Their opposing backgrounds and educations create heavy obstacles to their mutual understanding, as attested to by the fact that the others from Seigl's world cannot get past looking down with contempt on Alma and those from her world can only see Seigl through a veil of jealous hatred. Once the two do begin to engage in a limited dialogue towards the end of Part III, Alma's difficulty in understanding her employer is paralleled in his own inability to comprehend her. Alma's viewpoint is summarized in the following thought: "Why would he wish to be mistaken for a Jew, except to deceive? [...] / She thought, A [*sic*] man who plays at being a Jew is worse than any Jew" (*TTG* 260). Seigl's confusion is evident in his reflection on identity; he considers both his and Alma's existences to be riddles (*TTG* 264). Alma struggles with knowledge gaps due to her poor education and ideas of prejudice received from her family. Seigl grapples with the meaning of his existence and understanding the role Alma Busch might play in it. The fact that the characters engage in these reflections is an indication of the initiation of a process of change, of a desire to understand the other that might lead to the establishment of a new relationship.

In his article "Us and Them: Joyce Carol Oates and the Stories Students Tell" William DeGenaro writes about the college student/teacher relationship. However, his comments may apply to any relationship that can be perceived from an "us and them" standpoint. His point about "productive empathy [being] extremely difficult when we reduce students to a one-dimensional trait that positions them outside our privileged sphere"[204] is clearly pertinent to *The Tattooed Girl*. Indeed, it points to one of the novel's most important facets. Jet, in particular, and Seigl's upper middle class entourage in general, reduce those people they disapprove of to a one-dimensional trait. The threatening mail Jet sends her brother shows that she can only see him as a Jew-hater. Furthermore, her extreme reaction to her brother's

[204] DeGenaro 383.

death indicates the rigidity of her attitude towards his assistant. However, the novel also provides examples of the opposite kind of behavior. Over the course of the narrative, one-dimensional portraits of the main characters are gradually developed into multi-dimensional ones that lead to the construction of empathetic relationships between some of them.

Several parallels can be drawn between *them* and *The Tattooed Girl*. The cultural divide represented by different affinities for the written word is one of these. DeGenaro points out that Maureen in *them* is unable to forge an identification with her teacher because she does not understand the importance this latter places on books. She, for one, does not feel that books are more important than her own life. "Maureen is mystified," DeGenaro explains, "by the failure of high-literate practices to maintain their humanistic functions."[205] In *The Tattooed Girl* as well, the cultural divide between Seigl and Alma is illustrated through their different appreciations of books.[206] Though Seigl's and Alma's attitudes toward books clearly mark their difference, unlike Maureen and her teacher, discussion of books allow each a view into the other's world. Upon reading Seigl's novel, Alma reacts negatively because she does not understand the concept of "inventing" in a novel and how this act is different from that of "lying." She accuses Seigl of stealing from the people he pretends to be and know in his work (*TTG* 251-252). Ironically, Alma touches here on Seigl's own feelings of guilt at having "played a ventriloquist's trick in reverse, taking as his own the voices of others who yearned for home" (*TTG* 56). At the same time, when she passionately informs Seigl that her questions about the Holocaust are motivated by her desire to *know*, it becomes clear that the possibility of communication has been opened up between them (*TTG* 248-249). Seigl's cardiologist has discovered he has a "leaky" heart valve (*TTG* 246). It turns out that this pathology is both a physical affliction and a metaphorical representation. When Seigl

[205] DeGenaro 385.
[206] Creighton and Binette also mention this divide in relation to Laney and her mother, Arlene, in Oates's *Childwold*: "For Arlene, the dense philosophical works that Laney devours allow her daughter entrance into a secret world to which she has no access." Joanne V. Creighton and Kori A. Binette, "'What Does It Mean To Be A Woman?': The Daughter's Story in Oates's Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006): 441.

discovers that Alma has started reading his novel, he feels his heart react: "His heart kicked! His leaky-valved heart" (*TTG* 250). Alma's gesture kick-starts both her relationship with her employer as well as his heretofore uneasy connection with his text by putting the two on a more equal footing as the text proves difficult for both of them to deal with: "He too was overcome with awkwardness. For years he hadn't been able to bear speaking of *The Shadows* with any reader; he'd come to fear and loathe praise, and questions about the novel's relationship to his father's family roused him to anger" (*TTG* 250).

Though it is never clear whether or not Alma accepts Seigl's explanations of the role of fiction and the veracity of the Holocaust, it is apparent that their exchanges usher in a new era: "Always, since coming to work for Seigl, in this house, she had believed that no words Alma Busch might utter could have the slightest significance and so it surprised her, that Seigl had spoken to her as he had. She had seen the shock and hurt in his face, was this caused by *her*?" (*TTG* 256). Later, at the hospital, an inversion of roles indicates the crystallization of a new symbiotic relationship between them: "She was strong, stronger than Seigl in his flailing, weakened state. He had no choice but to give in" (*TTG* 273). As an outward sign of their new relationship, both make conciliatory gestures. At the hospital, Alma apologizes for the hurtful things she had said and once home Seigl gives her a necklace that had belonged to his mother (*TTG* 271, 278). Once again, Guagliardo's concept of "healing words" seems to apply as Oates, in the relationship she develops between these two characters, dramatizes "the importance of communication and affection in redeeming the loneliness inherent in the human condition."[207] Thus, if Seigl and Alma do achieve a modicum of redemption, it is the direct result of the connections they make with each other. This redemption, however, applies uniquely to the personal experiences of the characters, not to life experience. The ending shows that society itself is not redeemed. Ironically, because Alma's redemption is so

[207] Guagliardo 426.

intimately linked to her relationship with Seigl, once he passes away, she is also doomed. The reader can understand this but can do nothing to change it.

Though *The Tattooed Girl* clearly points to the possibility of redemption at the individual level through the establishment of connections between characters, it also highlights the difficulty such a hermeneutics of change is faced with in the wider realm of society. Oates's story evokes the notion of redemption but cannot be attributed a redemptive role itself in the sense of what Leo Bersani has described as the "culture of redemption," that is to say a "redemptive aesthetic" which "asks us to consider art as a correction of life."[208] As I have shown, the relationship between Seigl and Alma is based on misconceptions from both sides. Each mistakenly believes they possess the singular truth that will allow them to exercise control over reality. Each deals with reality by reducing it to fit within their narrow vision. Alma believes she can solve her need to revenge the traumatisms of her past through the murder of a member of the detested social set, the Jews. Seigl, on the other hand, thinks he can regain a measure of control over his disintegrating reality by helping a tender, gentle girl in need. However, each of these points of view is shown to be misled. As discussed above, the two characters achieve redemption only when they renounce their preconceived notions and accept to open themselves up to the possibility of otherness and are therefore liberated from the naïve belief that they can impose their personal ideas on the world. This is the kind of redemption Bersani advocates when he writes of "truth" being "liberated from phenomena."[209] Seigl and Alma are thus freed from the misconceptions of truth when they renounce their perceptions of transcendance and look for a different kind of truth in the otherness of life.

The renunciation that is present at the level of the novel's representation can also be found at the level of reception. Through Jet's extremely violent and seemingly senseless

[208] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000) 2.
[209] Bersani, 2.

murder of Alma in the closing pages, Oates can be said to liberate her reader from the obsession with truth, by showing that there is, in fact, no truth hidden in the story. At precisely the point where the reader seeks reassurance and transcendence of reality through his identification with the reformed character, Oates fights this urge by refusing to repair reality. Truth, she shows us, cannot be generalized; truth is individual. Alma's truth is different from Jet's truth, and both are different from the reader's truth. Indeed, the only truth that can be taken away from *The Tattooed Girl* is the inability of truth to be shared, in other words, the inability of the novel to provide an answer to life. In this way, Seigl's relationship to Alma might be read as a metaphor for the author/reader relationship. The communication of the one to the other encourages a movement away from the conception of truth as transcendance and towards an opening up to the otherness of life achieved precisely through the ability to question what is perceived as truth.

The interweaving of the motifs of "shadows" and "spiderwebs" in *The Tattooed Girl* establishes an unlikely connection between the story of Nazi death camp victims and the equally displaced Alma Busch and even Seigl himself, reminding us that the problem of displacement is not limited to certain traumatic historical events. Though by no means downplaying or belittling the experiences of European Jews during the Holocaust, *The Tattooed Girl*, as much of Oates's fiction, implies that though painful, dislocation is a necessary trial in the process of psychic evolution. In Oates's story "Death Astride Bicycle," an exchange, which takes the form of a reported conversation but which may in fact simply be the narrator discursing with herself, presents the problems of the nature of self and its relation to history in an amusing way:

> This summer the talk is of Mr. Waller so changed he's not himself.
> Who is he, then? – if he's not himself.
> It's a way of speaking. Don't be so literal.

> Yes, but look! If I am not my*self*, but another *self*, who is this *self* I've become? And where is the absent *self*?
> It's a way of speaking! Human communication.
> Mr. Waller used to tell us there's nothing more unreliable than human communication. You hear what nobody said not quite exactly that way. You tell it to somebody else who gets it wrong, and repeats it to other people who get it wrong and repeat it, and you all go on believing it till death. That's history.[210]

As this chapter has shown, the notions alluded to briefly in the above passage from "Death Astride Bicycle" are dominant themes in *The Tattooed Girl*. The central characters struggle with the seemingly impossible task of comprehending and controlling the self in an inherently flawed world. This serves to highlight the imprecise, unreliable nature of human communication through a narrative structure which foregrounds the notion of repeated historical wrongs, even closing, we can imagine, on the verge of the perpetration of yet another wrong.[211] Hence, we might read the ending of *The Tattooed Girl* as composed of a doubly ironic twist: Jet, the murderess, is a perfectly integrated member of society (especially now that her brother is no longer around to question her sanity) whereas Alma, who has ultimately evolved after having committed no major harm, is unable to camouflage herself within society due to the tattoo-designs covering her body. The tragedy is that with her physical disappearance her true identity will be lost forever. We live in a world, *The Tattooed Girl* ultimately shows, wherein there is much possibility of confusion and nothing is as it seems. In such a mysterious realm, "good" does not always have the final word.[212] This is, however, the legacy of our common humanity which must be accepted if it cannot be transcended. In the novella *Beasts* Oates explores this common humanity from another angle as, contrary to Jet, Gillian's story presents an act of killing that seems wholly justified.

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[210] Joyce Carol Oates, "Death Astride Bicycle," *The Collector of Hearts* (New York: Dutton, 1998) 228-229. "Death Astride Bicycle" was originally published in *Western Humanities Review* 49.1 (Spring 1995): 3-5.

[211] Jet murders Alma depriving the latter of the ability to prove herself innocent of the crime of which she is suspected. One can imagine that Jet and Seigl's family and friends' narrative of Alma as aggressor and Seigl as victim will be the one to remain dominant.

[212] The final words of *The Tattooed Girl* are spoken by Jet to the lawyer, Crossman: "'It's over. There's justice now'" (*TTG* 307). The way in which the theme of justice is problematized in Oates's fiction is important and will be discussed further in Chapter 4 on *Rape: A Love Story* and in Part III in relation to its place in detective fiction.

Chapter III
Beasts: The Case of the Girl Who Got What She Wanted

In "Sexual Politics in Two Collections of Joyce Carol Oates's Short Fiction," Brenda Daly discusses Oates's story "Accomplished Desires" which involves a female student, Dorie, having an affair with a married professor. Dorie desires not only the man, but also the accomplishments of his successful wife.[213] However, upon getting what she wants – Dorie and the professor eventually marry – she realizes that she does not really want it. "In fact," writes Daly, "it is only the man who has accomplished his desires: he has replaced his 'formidable' wife, winner of a Pulitzer he desires for himself, with a younger woman whose only accomplishment will be to care for his house and his children."[214]

Beasts portrays a similar pattern of desire. Gillian succeeds in beginning a sexual relationship with her professor and his wife and is welcomed into their home to share a variety of intimate experiences. Like Dorie in "Accomplished Desires," the fulfillment of her wish does not bring her much happiness, lending credence to Oscar Wilde's famous words: "There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." Unlike Dorie, however, Gillian is eventually able to take her life back into her own hands. She is liberated from the role of victimized young woman when she shifts her behavior from submission to action, earning her place among Oates's "women who bear witness against violence and, in the act of narration, acquire power as agents of change."[215] The way out, though, cannot be read as the simple celebration of female escape from tyrannical male entrapment, Oates brings up more complex notions of responsibility and justice. *Beasts* explores the controversial yet complementary issues of victimization and complicity. Does

[213] Joyce Carol Oates, "Accomplished Desires," *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1970) 111-130. This is a recurrent motif throughout the Oates canon. Oates's character Maureen in her acclaimed novel *them* also does this. Mayra, of *Marya: A Life*, is also involved with a professor, Professor Fein.
[214] Daly, "Sexual Politics" 87.
[215] Daly, "Sexual Politics" 92.

Gillian willingly put herself within the Harrows's grasp or do they somehow set a trap for her? Directly related to this is the question of how the victim sees and understands the situation and the Harrows's role in it.

In another Oates story, "Donor Organs," Jason T. obsessively reflects on both his attraction to death and his fear of it. A liberally educated young man, Jason has expressed the desire to be an organ donor, to give "to some other person in need." Yet he is haunted by the idea that his eyes could be "harvested" from his body and planted in that of a stranger. It "freaks him out totally, the prospect of somebody else looking through his eyes for wouldn't Jason be there, too? somehow, still? in his eyes?"[216] Here, the problem of the "I" as represented by the "eye" is taken to the extreme. However, it effectively, perhaps shockingly, raises the timeless question of self and point of view, pointing to the potentially conflicting human urges of yearning for community and desiring to retain a certain amount of individuality. The question of point of view is important in *Beasts* as there is only one focalizer, the narrator, and the struggle between community and individuality is one of the driving forces of the narrative. This chapter will discuss how Gillian's weak sense of self (mis)leads her into a problematic relationship from which her only hope of escape is a violent assertion of power in her own right. In *Beasts*, this process touches on many of the mysteries that have already been discussed in regards to *The Falls* and *The Tattooed Girl*, such as fathoming the self, deciphering the words and actions of others, and becoming a fully-formed, emotionally free being.

[216] Joyce Carol Oates, "Donor Organs," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 46.2 (Spring 2007): 298, 300.

1.3.1. Unreliable Eye/I

If the multiple viewpoints in *The Tattooed Girl* highlight the incomplete aspect of any single point of view, the simple statement that *Beasts* is a first person narrative should be enough to point to the problematic nature of the information related by the narrator. First person narrators can deliberately dissimulate, and even when they in good faith report the "truth" from their standpoint, the enigmatic nature of the self means that this point of view will always remain to a certain extent incomplete. Oates's emphasis on defective eyes and blurry vision in *The Tattooed Girl* calls attention to the incomplete nature of the way the individual, the "I", experiences the world. However, the narrative is reported from a third person semi-omniscient point of view which grants it a certain degree of objectivity. In *Beasts* the problem of incomplete viewpoints is compounded by the limited perspective of the narrator. Furthermore, one wonders if her narrative is reported in complete good faith.

"For Oates," writes Ellen Friedman, "American history continually repeats the drama of the isolated ego."[217] Gillian, the narrator of *Beasts*, is a prime example. In spite of her best efforts to portray herself as a victim, Gillian's story is the story of a young woman guilty of privileging her own desires over all else. *Beasts* is the retrospectively narrated tale of a semester in Gillian's life as a college student during which she becomes involved in an abusive sexual relationship with a depraved older couple: her poetry professor, Andre Harrow, and his sculptress wife, Dorcas.

Gillian presents herself from the beginning of her narrative as an infatuated young college student who, like Alma Busch in *The Tattooed Girl*, is not entirely in control of her impulses.[218] When she discusses tailing Dorcas she describes her impulse to do so as beyond

[217] Friedman, "The Journey from the 'I' to the 'Eye'" 38.
[218] Pamela Smiley discusses what she calls "a mind-body split, characteristic of the incest victim's defensive response to trauma" and cites the following passage from Oates's *With Shuddering Fall*: "Karen began to experience a strange sensation then – that of being eased suddenly away from herself and able to watch from a distance her slow progress. A frail girl with blond hair blown ragged by the wind, and a blank exhausted face, pale blue eyes that probably reflect madness" (44). While there are no indications in either *The Tattooed Girl* or

her control, as if she has been in some way bewitched by the woman, and insists on the innocent nature of her role in the events:

1) "I hurried to follow Dorcas as if she'd called to me. What choice had I? / I was drawn in the woman's wake like a fluttering scrap of paper in the wake of a rushing vehicle."[219]
2) "These small adventures were not premeditated, as you can see. They were not willed." (*B* 12)

Gillian is either deluded about her own personal responsibility or dishonest with her readers. She claims to be a purely innocent victim preyed upon by the two older deviants who are more experienced and more powerful. Yet the heroine's outward innocence may not be entirely what it seems. The complexity of Gillian's character would be grossly understated if she were immediately dismissed as an innocent victim. And yet, there can be no doubt that, as so many Oatesian female characters before her, Gillian is a victim.[220] However, Oates complicates the situation since the character she describes is not initially forced into her relationship with the Harrows, but rather, actively pursues it like her fictional predecessor Marya. The protagonist of *Marya: A Life*[221] is another college student who falls in love with a professor. She "seeks out [professor] Fein because she admires and emulates his intellectual genius and academic accomplishments."[222] However, Fein turns out to be manipulative and the relationship is not ideal. It therefore seems likely that Gillian bears some degree of reponsibility for the situation, especially as, like Marya, her own obsessions are responsible for leading her down the path towards the Harrows's lair. Behind Gillian's dangerous obsession is an insecure sense of self compounded by a disintegrating relationship with her parents.

Beasts that the characters Alma Busch and Gillian Brauer are victims of incest, they both certainly let themselves be used by men in a way that corresponds to Smiley's incest victim pattern.

[219] Joyce Carol Oates, *Beasts* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002) 11. Hereafter abbreviated as *B*.

[220] Female victims in Oates's fiction have drawn the attention of critics with varying results. Pamela Smiley attributes the sexual abuse of daughter characters to a "fictional world, lacking mothers, dominated by fathers and their needs, [which] offers few alternatives to violence and spiritual disintegration" (48). Creighton and Binette, on the other hand, point to "the freighted mother-daughter relationship" as the impetus for daughters' involvement in sexually demeaning relationships (440).

[221] Joyce Carol Oates, *Marya: A Life* (New York: Berkley Books, 1988).

[222] Creighton and Binette 447.

Upon close examination the story contains clues to ambiguous aspects of the young woman's character from the very start. Gillian is a classic untrustworthy narrator in the line of Poe's protagonists struggling at the frontier between sanity and madness. Before narrating the final incident at the Harrows's house, Gillian acknowledges that her recollection of events is incomplete: "My memory of the next several hours is confused. My memory of the next forty-eight hours, in fact" (*B* 126). However, it is when she does not preface her narrative with this caveat that the risk of the reader being misled is greatest. For example, after presenting her evidence that she was not responsible for tailing Dorcas, Gillian continues with "I was no predator seeking prey, I was myself the prey. I was the innocent party" (*B* 12). This is a reflection, however, that can only be made with the wisdom of hindsight. She is, therefore, whether deliberately or unconsciously, putting a spin on her narrative to portray herself as innocent and naïve. One way to read this is to consider that it points to Gillian's sanity as a mature woman at the time of narration, which diminishes the appearance of mental discrepancies in her character at the moment the events were experienced.

During a visit to the chapel when she "resolved not to brood upon Andre Harrow anymore, and not to be distracted by thoughts of his wife" she thinks "*I want to be good. I want to be sensible, sane*" (*B* 11). Yet upon leaving the establishment her resolutions fall directly away when she spies Dorcas and hurries to follow her. Maintaining an acceptable degree of sanity is something Gillian apparently finds very difficult. Upon another occasion she once again seems unsure of her grasp on reality: "Was I imagining this? I was not." This is in response to her realization in class one day that "the voice of my professor Andre Harrow was the very voice of my dream, unmistakable. / *Gillian, you will be loved. I will care for you*" (*B* 30). Furthermore, the question of Gillian's sanity is never satisfactorily answered. Her strange reaction twenty-five years later to the sight of the totem in the Louvre points to the psychological power the Harrows still have over her:

> I was confused, I wasn't thinking coherently. In the chilly, austere room in which the aboriginal totem was displayed it exuded an air so raw, elemental, primitive it seemed only minimally human. I stared at it, and shuddered. I turned away, wanting to leave, but found myself staring at the totem again, having returned to stand before it. As if the nursing mother had called to me . . . *Gillian? Don't be afraid. We are beasts, this is our consolation*. (*B* 1-2)

Gillian's behavior here is strange enough to attract the attention of a middle-aged American couple who express their concern. The following explanation is provided:

> I'd been stricken with light-headedness and may have been swaying on my feet. But now I was fine. And I didn't want to be approached, and I didn't want to be touched. The couple continued to stare at me so I repeated, "Thank you!" and turned decisively away.
>
> I left the Louvre, shaken. Blindly I walked along the Seine embankment. That totem! So ugly, and yet so powerful. And the eyes. (*B* 2)

Whether or not she is completely sane, it is certain that Gillian suffers from a lack of confidence. That is one explanation for her constant questioning. Her low self-esteem is apparent in her reaction to Dorcas's wood sculptures: "Always it seemed strange to me, uncanny, that such primitive figures, hardly more than hunks of untreated wood with rudimentary human features, and blank eyes, should seem more alive than I" (*B* 110). Earlier in the novella, Gillian had expressed her feelings of kinship to the totem titled "Girl" thus communicating her fear that she does not measure up to the other girls in her class (*B* 16-17).

Gillian's initial instability appears to be connected to a dysfunctional family situation. Her parents are going through a divorce and she latches on to her poetry professor as a sort of substitute father figure. As Creighton and Binette point out in their study of the role of the daughter in six Oates novels, this is a familiar motif in Oates's fiction:

> In an effort to escape the profound ambivalence that characterizes their relationships with their mothers, the six daughters engage in what psychoanalysts term "the turn to the father." [...] In Oates's novels, this is not literally a father; in fact, real fathers are rather hard to come by in her novels as they are frequently absent, dead, abusive, or alcoholic. Instead, the turn to the father is enacted with a father figure, usually an older male mentor or other figure of authority, with whom the daughter is initiated into sexuality. [...] Further complicating the turn to the father is the fact that the male authority

> figure is often involved in initiating the daughter into the world of language, literature, or culture as well.[223]

In the case of *Beasts*, Gillian's turn to a substitute father, her poetry professor, is prompted by the absence of her real father who has recently left her mother. It is Gillian's mother who is the bearer of the bad news and her mother whom Gillian punishes by hanging up "with Mother still talking" (*B* 27) and later tearing up the pink slip in her mailbox directing her to call her mother immediately: "With trembling fingers I tore the slip into pieces. 'What do I care for *her*, or for *him*?' It did seem to me that familial love was mere duty: a bad smell" (*B* 31). The narrative structure enhances the notion that the poetry professor is a substitute father figure by juxtaposing, on several occasions, passages concerning Gillian's father with others focusing on Andre Harrow. For example, the night after she learns from her mother that her father has left she dreams about a man: "But that night when I finally got to sleep I didn't dream about my father. I dreamt of a man whose face I couldn't see clearly but I was allowed to know *He loves me. He will care for me*" (*B* 27-28). Though she cannot see his face in her dream, she understands this male presence to be that of her professor. The roots of Gillian's obsession, then, are found in her fragile mental state and the need to fill the space left by her absent parents. Thus, following a familiar pattern, the inherently problematic relationship between the self and the world – represented by the nature of the protagonist's vision – breeds lack of understanding and communication, leading to anger, frustration, obsession and previously unthinkable acts. Gillian's obsession with her professor is accompanied by a lack-of-knowledge complex. Understandably, then, the motifs of mystery and secrecy occupy an important role in her story.

The secrecy, hesitation and constant questioning that pervade the text enhance the narrator's emotional instability. Indeed, in *Beasts*, few facts are known for sure. Though

[223] Creighton and Binette 446.

obsessed with the idea of knowing, Gillian is never sure of herself. She constantly hesitates between one version or another, as in the following three examples:

1) "Was that a good thing, or not so good a thing?" (*B* 16)
2) "It was that simple, and yet it wasn't simple at all." (*B* 13)
3) "It was a joke, I think." (*B* 33)

Aporetic language abounds. Gillian is preoccupied by two mysteries which may or may not be connected. A great deal of the narration is devoted first to speculation about which of her friends have had secret relationships with her professor and his wife – "I believed I knew two or three of these girls. I wasn't certain. There was an air of secrecy about this" (*B* 14) – and second to the origin of a chain of mysterious fires set around campus. Gillian has a personal interest in both of these enigmas as the first is directly linked to her own desire and the second to her physical safety. In addition, both phenomena are issues of life and death since, concerning the former, several girls are driven to attempt suicide, and concerning the latter, she and her friends are worried about fire being set to their dorm while they are asleep at night. However, neither Gillian, nor her friends, nor the investigators she mentions are able to clear things up. "Catamount Township fire investigators had come to the conclusion that a single individual had probably set the fires" (*B* 22), a view that is shared by Gillian and her friends who discuss possible motives including mental imbalance, attention seeking, resentment towards rich college girls, or lovesickness and passion (*B* 23-25). Thus, Gillian finds herself in a situation where her mental well-being is contingent on information ostensibly unavailable to her.[224] As remarked by Uri Eisenzweig in his analysis of Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "uncertainty" is also a kind of "madness."[225]

[224] This sort of puzzle is a common one in Oates stories. I have already discussed the problems experienced by the Burnaby children in *The Falls* when kept in the dark about their father's death. The following chapter will discuss Teena's anguish in *Rape: A Love Story* when she is unable to understand the motivations driving the men who attacked her.

[225] Uri Eisenzweig, "L'instance du policier dans le romanesque: Balzac, Poe et le mystère de la chambre close," *Poétique* 51 (Septembre 1982): 279-302. Eisenzweig's theory and its implications for Oates's text will be discussed in depth in Part III of this study.

Gillian's obsession seems to lead to a kind of madness as she loses the ability to control her impulses and falls madly in love with her poetry professor, experiencing a sort of temporary insanity in his presence: "I, Gillian Brauer, who managed to speak coherently and intelligently in my other classes, was made speechless by this man" (*B* 35). Andre Harrow provokes an uncontrollable reaction on the part of the narrator. However, it is difficult to fully believe her when she states: "I was no predator seeking prey, I was myself the prey. I was the innocent party" (*B* 12). This simplification of the events effectively overlooks Gillian's agency in what happened. Futhermore, the certainty of the statement is at odds with the overall narrative voice which is largely one of ambiguity and uncertainty abounding in question marks, modals and such ambivalent expressions as "or maybe," "someone," "I never knew whether" and "no one seemed to know." Indeed, the short imperative sentence "*Go for the jugular*," repeated five times in the space of twenty pages, would seem to be at odds with the portrait of the victim the narrator's words imply.

These inconsistencies in Gillian's character make it very difficult to decide whether or not she should be trusted, whether to consider her in a positive or negative light. Such distinctions, however, are most likely beside the point. As Joan Winslow points out: "Many of Oates's characters have this two-sided quality: one side ordinary and respectable, the other side ruled by such forbidden impulses as lust, violence, and hate."[226] Another possible way to consider Gillian might be along the lines of how Winslow reads the character Connie from Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Winslow considers Connie as belonging "to the line of Oates characters who are overwhelmed by the discovery of the dark instincts within them."[227] Her story shows, writes Winslow, "that when we hide the

[226] Joan D. Winslow, "The Stranger Within: Two Stories By Oates and Hawthorne," *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 (1980): 263.
[227] Winslow 267.

knowledge of these disturbing impulses from ourselves, their inevitable emergence – whether as devil figure or unexpected aberrant behavior – surprises and terrifies us."[228]

Thus, Gillian is an unreliable "eye" for multiple reasons. She seems to have something to hide and her language appears deliberately vague. Furthermore, due to the nature of the first person narrative, her problems of interpretation and inability to decipher meaning, no matter whether genuine or contrived, are directly passed on to the reader. Of the 20 January fire at the Harrows she confesses: "For it was never real to me. Never would it seem other than a confused dream" (*B* 5). Whether this is deliberate dissimulation or the result of an unconscious defense mechanism, Gillian's narrative does not allow us to know. Thus, the reader is destined to an eternal state of wondering. Mystery and limited vision are intimately linked in *Beasts*, the latter is directly responsible for the former.

The problem of limited vision, which has already been discussed in relation to the characters in *The Tattooed Girl*, is an inherent characteristic of the self. As Oates explains in *(Woman) Writer*:

> In the human eye no light energy can stimulate the retina at the exit of the optic tract: all human beings carry blind spots with them in their vision. Everywhere we look there are points of invisibility, it might be said; and, since they are invisible, they cannot be seen even as absence. We are all in the position of Lear, who, holding absolute authority over his kingdom, had "but slenderly known himself."[229]

Thus, this characteristic is one that the artist must strive to communicate all the while knowing it to be a flaw that can never be resolved. However, as Cologne-Brookes points out, "even if incomplete vision were not inevitable, it might be desirable. The complete vision implies something containable, and so without possibility or mystery. Completion may be a form of death."[230] Whether desirable or not, incomplete vision leads to all sorts of

[228] Winslow 268.
[229] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Art of Self-Criticism," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988) 33-34. I first encountered this citation in an article by Gavin Cologne-Brookes: "Introduction: Humility, Audacity and the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006): 388.
[230] Cologne-Brookes, "Introduction: Humility, Audacity and the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates" 388.

consequences one of which is the problematic nature of desire, as Gillian's narrative makes clear.

1.3.2. Problematic Nature of Desire

> Our greatest 19th-century prose writers from Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville through Henry James and Mark Twain took it for granted that "American" is an identity fraught with ambiguity, as in those allegorical parables by Hawthorne in which "good" and "evil" are mysteriously conjoined; to be an "American" is to be a kind of pilgrim, an archetypal seeker after truth. Though destined to be thwarted, even defeated, the pilgrim is our deepest and purest American self.[231]

These words of Oates's from the opening paragraph of a review of Curtis Sittenfeld's *American Wife* introduce the idea that for Americans, at least, feeling that one is an outsider might in fact be the norm. Oates develops the portrait of "the American outsider" in the following paragraph, describing him as "the excluded, disadvantaged, often envious and obsessive observer of others' seemingly privileged lives."[232] This description immediately calls to mind the narrator protagonist of *Beasts*. Like Sittenfeld's character Lee Fiora, whom Oates describes as "a 21st-century American-girl pilgrim of sorts" on a quest not "for a searing and illuminating truth" but "to be 'popular' with her peers and to be noticed – to be kissed – by the boy of her dreams,"[233] Gillian is also on a quest; she wants to be noticed and loved by her poetry professor and by so doing acquire for herself the aura of sexy mysteriousness she has sensed in her friends. Like a pilgrim setting out on a journey to the unknown, Gillian's quest is not without its element of danger. Like Marya before her, Gillian falls prey to a loss of control. Creighton and Binette discuss this process in relation to Marya: "In idealizing him [Professor Fein], however, she steadily loses control of her own perceptive

[231] Joyce Carol Oates, "The First Lady," *The New York Times* (31 August 2008).
[232] Oates, "The First Lady." Oates claims that this outsider mental space is one occupied by the majority of Americans. This idea is complimentary to Baudrillard and Guillaume's concept of spectrality that will be discussed in Chapter 7.
[233] Oates, "The First Lady."

abilities; she can only see the world, and see herself, through Fein's eyes."[234] Gillian's desire also blinds her to the truth of her sordid victimization.

In a 1979 story, "The Murderess," Oates's heroine Anne-Marie pays the consequences of not being able to give up a pair of boots that she has outgrown: "The nail of her right toe was thickened and somewhat discolored: the boots she'd insisted upon wearing all winter were too tight but she had not wanted to give them up. Even now the toe sometimes hurt. It had bled beneath the nail, in near-invisible bluish streaks."[235] This relatively harmless example points to a potentially more serious problem, that of the unforseen consequences of desire, the stakes of which are raised exponentially in the later novella. The reader may not be sure whether or not Gillian can be trusted on the origin of the Catamount campus fires, however, it seems fairly certain that she did not know the full extent of what she would be getting involved in when she longed to be romantically connected to her poetry professor.

Gillian's desire for her poetry professor is the result, as we have seen, of her problematic relationship with her parents and her low self-esteem which combine to create a lack that she fills with this passionate infatuation, an obsession which prompts her to engage in transgressive acts. Gillian has certain points in common with another Oates character, Richard Everett of *Expensive People*. Richard is also a first-person narrator confessing his involvement in a death: "I was a child murderer," his narrative provocatively begins.[236] Like Richard when he enters his mother's forbidden room and "experiences a curious exhiliration and satisfaction at having ventured into something forbidden, something long desired,"[237] Gillian, too, after getting off to a rocky start, initially feels a deep sense of satisfaction at her relationship with the Harrows, a feeling that will only be broken as a result of the couple's betrayal.

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[234] Creighton and Binette 447.
[235] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Murderess," *Western Humanities Review* 33.1 (Winter 1979): 24-25.
[236] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1968) 5.
[237] Udo Hebel, "Breaking through the 'Suburban Wasteland': Transgression as Affirmation of the self in Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People,*" *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 16.1 (1991): 20.

Gillian's relationship with Andre Harrow is unmistakably associated with the night-side of her personality. Upon the occasion of their first kiss he leads her "out of the lighted area of the campus and into the dark where there were only intermittent lights on poles to guide our way" (*B* 61). Despite the intensity of Gillian's obsession, her physical reaction is not initially on par with her mental processes. When Andre kisses her for the first time, for example, she panics and resists him (*B* 62). Yet not even her own physical reaction and Andre's cold shoulder can diminish the extent of her desire: "And yet: it was Andre Harrow I wished desperately to please. If I could please him, I reasoned, I'd be safe. No one could harm me" (*B* 78). After Gillian finally gives herself sexually to Andre Harrow,[238] she is described as even more physically diminished:

> In the mirror, my eyes failed to come into focus. My mouth was bruised. I'd vowed to Andre Harrow that I loved him, I loved him and I would die for him, and he'd laughed at these extravagant words and asked what good would I be to him then, a dead girl. And in the lavatory mirror there floated the waxy-pale face of the dead girl. Her bruised, aching mouth. (*B* 86)

Yet in spite of the physical warning signs, Gillian persists; she feels "blessed" and is proud of having earned the right to be Dorcas's intern. Gaining access to Andre and Dorcas's house provides her with a sense of accomplishment since she will never again "have to crouch outside in the dripping woods like a beast" (*B* 92). Ironically, however, the passage from exterior to interior does nothing to take away Gillian's bestiality. There is simply a shift in the nature of her animality. She is transformed from an unwanted beast into an adored pet. A few pages later, she reports Dorcas referring to her as a "belle little animal" (*B* 94) and she describes herself as a dog: "I basked in that laughter like a dog that has been kicked but is now being petted, and is grateful" (*B* 97). This fits, of course, with the expression Dorcas chooses to accompany her sculpture exhibition, an expression that haunts Gillian throughout the text: "We are beasts and this is our consolation" (*B* 2, 13, 119). As a desiring subject,

[238] Gillian clearly plays a submissive role in the relationship: "He pushed me onto my knees; onto the braided rug laid upon the hardwood floor. His hand at the nape of my neck was unhesitating" (*B* 86).

Gillian is no better or worse than the Harrows. Everyone must fend for themselves. Gillian's feeling of fulfillment and assurance in the Harrows company begins to fade when they do not take her with them to Paris as initially promised. In spite of their betrayal, Gillian is lonely for them and spends her time prowling around the house, which leads to her discovery of the "bulging files" of pornographic photographs, a discovery that "felt as if someone had struck me a numbing blow between the shoulder blades" (*B* 113). This is the blow that finally breaks the spell, opening Gillian's eyes to the fact that she has been used.

The parallel between the transgressive behaviors of Richard Everett of *Expensive People* and Gillian Brauer of *Beasts* has already been drawn. One wonders whether Gillian's transgressive impulses were originally manifested, like Richard's, as destructive physical impulses, in this case setting fires to express her frustrated passion. She seems to have such a good reading on the campus fires, might she not be responsible? At one point, she almost seems to incriminate herself when she declines to go to the Psych Center with Cassie, explaining in her journal: "Who wants her thoughts recorded in a computer bank? For anyone to discover? Who wants to be known as a patient? Seeing a therapist? A shrink? / You'd be one of the first suspects. When/if a catastrophe occurred" (*B* 78). Does she already suspect she might eventually do something wrong? Has she already done something wrong? Or is her remark completely innocent? Though the nature of Gillian's relationship to the campus fires remains ambiguous, whether or not she is responsible for them she certainly sets herself apart by her understanding attitude towards their perpetrator. When Richard uses vomiting as an act of revolt, he "oversteps the limits," writes Hebel, "of generally accepted behavior and moves beyond that point where one might 'come loose.'"[239] Likewise, Gillian's admission to her friends that she understands the motive behind the fires to be the expression of thwarted passionate desire also places her outside the realm of generally accepted behavior, as

[239] Hebel 21.

illustrated by the uncomfortable response from her friends and her own subsequent embarrassment upon realizing she has revealed too much:

> "My idea is: she's in love. She's sick, she's crazy in love."
> "In love with . . . who?"
> There was a silence. Marisa giggled nervously. Dominique blew her nose. I felt my face burn and knew that a humiliating blush was lifting into my cheeks like an outspread hand.
> Each of us was thinking *Andre Harrow. But we must not utter the name*. (*B* 25)

Though the other girls might also have entertained this idea, none of them would dream of voicing it aloud as Gillian has done.

In addition to destructive physical impulses, Richard and Gillian share the fact that their transgressive behavior leads to "epiphanic moments."[240] Richard comes to a rude realization about his mother after breaking into the records room at his school to check his IQ scores: "The result of his undertaking is just horrifying as he detects that he scored 153 and 161 points on his IQ tests. He has to recognize that his mother was not satisfied with an excellent score of 153 and had him go through the test again for the insignificant improvement of eight more points."[241] Similarly, Gillian's epiphany about the Harrows also comes after she transgresses a space that is forbidden to her. Though they have not strictly forbidden her to go upstairs, Gillian understands that by doing so she is transgressing an unspoken boundary. In Andre's study, a filing cabinet attracts her attention: "The filing cabinet, which consisted of three deep drawers, was locked. But eventually I found the key, taped to the underside of the desk" (*B* 113). The filing cabinet, she discovers, is home to "bulging files" of pornographic photos and magazines and some of the photos are of girls she recognizes, including herself (*B* 113-117). Acutely aware of the rumors around campus and having witnessed a girl in the Harrows' house one night, Gillian already knew that she was not the first privileged person, however, her discovery in the office both concretely represents

[240] Hebel 22. Hebel quotes from Sanford Pinsker, "Suburban Molesters: Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People*," *Midwest Quarterly* 19 (1977): 100.
[241] Hebel 22.

her situation to her and cheapens it at the same time: "My hands shook, lifting these [magazines]. Would my photo turn up in a porn magazine; had that been their intention all along . . . ?" (*B* 114-115). Richard's discovery offers him "proof of [his mother's] emotional indifference"[242] as does Gillian's devastating find. Gillian describes her state after the discovery as trance-like: "I went downstairs. Still I was numbed, unreal. If a plan was taking shape in my mind, as a dream begins to form itself, by day, out of the residue of the day, to burst into splendor by night, I had no awareness of it" (*B* 117). Gillian's response to the situation, like the impulses that got her involved in the first place, are attributed to the night-side of her personality. "For Oates," writes Ellen Friedman, "the process of creation culminates in consciousness, in the dual awareness of self and other. She suggests that although it is a precarious and painful condition [...], it is the only way to enter one's history, to achieve one's identity."[243]

Had Gillian not given in to desire, had she not engaged in the transgressive relationship with her poetry professor, she would have been spared a great deception. However, she would also have lost the chance for self-affirmation that the relationship ultimately affords: before ending her narrative, she reveals that she "graduated from Catamount College, with honors, in 1977" (*B* 137) and has become a successful woman, "provost of a small, but distinguished, liberal arts college in suburban Philadelphia" (*B* 138). In her discussion of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Joan Winslow touches on the problems associated with denying emotions:

> To Oates, such refusal to acknowledge that these feelings [lust, violence, hate] are a part of human existence is a greater evil than the expression of the forbidden impulses. In *Expensive People*, Richard's furious tantrum in the flower bed is deliberately misunderstood and made to seem "quite all right"; nevertheless, his ignored anger grows until it ends in a (real or delusionary) murder. The denial of human emotions, however unpleasant or frightening they may be, is far more dangerous than the emotions themselves.[244]

[242] Hebel 22.
[243] Friedman, "The Journey from the 'I' to the 'Eye'" 48.
[244] Winslow 263.

Unlike Richard, Gillian consistently gives in to her emotional impulses and this plays an important role in her process of individualization. She admits to playing a role in the deaths of two people, but this is presented as a necessary part of the process and nothing to feel guilty about. As she says in the introduction to her story: "You will see, I have nothing to confess" (*B* 3). Thus, Gillian appears to be one of those Oates characters described by Waller in his conclusion "who have survived an unpredictable and absurd set of crises and struggles. They have pursued an obsession, often by violence or the destruction of apparent order, and have triumphed. Theirs is the way of transcendent affirmation."[245] Accepting the possibility of "liberation through violence"[246] is essential to understanding Gillian in this way. Gillian also fits the pattern identified by Creighton and Binette in their study of Oates's daughter characters:

> Looking at all eight of these works, then, what is surprising and heartening – given the obstacles they face and the dauntingly difficult family dynamics they work through – is that each of the daughters emerges from her relationship with her mother and "father" with a heightened sense of agency; all assume some measure of control over their lives.[247]

In the case of Gillian, the mother figure is also a substitute, but the basic pattern of emerging from a situation involving difficult sexual dynamics remains the same.

1.3.3. Power of Life and Death

One of the disturbing aspects of the corpus works is the sense of empowerment and lack of guilt experienced by the characters once they are in a position to exercise the power of deciding whether another character lives or dies. Royall, the text of *The Falls* hints, may be involved in the disappearance of Judge Stroughton Howell. Gillian of *Beasts* sets a fire that

[245] Waller 215.
[246] Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 145.
[247] Creighton and Binette 455.

destroys her abusers. The Maguires appeal for John Dromoor's help in *Rape: A Love Story* and he proceeds to exact his own form of justice. Killing, for all of these characters is a liminal act in the move from a state of paralysis and stagnation to one of control.[248] However, Oates seems to suggest that there is a reverse side to the issue. If moral justification for killing by characters of whom the reader approves can be found, it is also possible that it can be claimed for characters who do not earn such approval. As I have discussed, *The Tattooed Girl*'s Jet also believes herself justified in taking a life. The question of legitimacy, it seems, is directly related to an adherence to a certain point of view. The characters' convictions make it seem that murder is the only possible solution, however, one also has the chance, when given the opportunity of taking a life, not to do so. This is Juliet's decision when she spares the life of Bud Stonecrop's father in *The Falls*. However, it is decidedly the minority choice among the characters in the primary sources studied here.

Before discussing the problematic power granted to someone given the ability to decide whether or not to take a life to revenge a wrong, let us return to Oates's story "The Murderess" which offers another look at the dynamics of such a power. When the story begins "many years ago in Sharon Springs, Vermont,"[249] Anne-Marie Thayer is experiencing a period of intense hatred for her father's cousin, Constance Price, who is visiting the family at their summer home. Anne-Marie's parents have welcomed Constance to their home because she apparently has nowhere else to go. Six years previously she killed her husband in self-defense; since that time scandal, public outrage, and suspicion have followed her. When queried by a friend about Constance's involvement in the incident, Anne-Marie's mother responds "'Well, it was a horrible thing and all we want is to forget it. The poor woman is still

[248] Udo Hebel reminds us that this is also the case for Oates's Richard Everett of *Expensive People*: "The protagonist's final attempt at the 'single, crucial *thing* that could draw [him] out of his paralysis,' amounts to nothing less than a murderous assault on his mother" (25).
[249] Oates, "The Murderess" 19.

young, she's hardly my age.'"[250] Anne-Marie, however, is less open-minded about the situation and wishes no less than death on this woman she insists on thinking of as "the murderess." Anne-Marie's intense feelings for her distant relative are mysterious. It is clear that she does not share her parents' interpretation of the events. What her mother refers to as "a tragedy," an act of "self-defense" with "mitigating circumstances," Anne-Marie insists on labeling as "murder."[251] It is unclear, however, why she maintains this point of view. The only motive slightly hinted at by the text is that of jealousy: "She [Constance] was, Anne-Marie could see, conscious of herself and her special destiny at all times."[252] Anne-Marie's attitude towards Constance is completely reversed by an accident that gives her the power to decide Constance's fate: she pulls the drowning woman out of the pool and performs CPR to save her life. From this moment on, the two become inseparable, appearing to others as an "exceptionally close" mother-daughter pair.[253] To summarize, Anne-Marie felt threatened by this woman who had taken a life, even if it was in self-defense. A balance between them is only established once Anne-Marie herself has also been in a similar position of power. Anne-Marie's relationship to "the murderess" points to the importance of power relations in the creation of a well-rounded, functioning subject. A similar process is depicted in each of the corpus works. The act of killing (or the ability to decide whether a person lives or dies) is more than just revenge; it is an act of empowerment that places the characters on an equal footing in society and allows them to occupy a legitimate place in the community. In *Beasts* this idea cannot be separated from the fire imagery that accompanies Gillian throughout the text and is clearly an integral part of the narrative.

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[250] Oates, "The Murderess" 29.
[251] Oates, "The Murderess" 25.
[252] Oates, "The Murderess" 26. Anne-Marie can be placed in a long line of young Oates protagonists who struggle with the opacity of the adult world, a world of secrets and mystery to which they are denied access due to their age.
[253] Oates, "The Murderess" 34.

1.3.3.1. Fire Imagery

Fire is a recurrent theme in *Beasts* and is linked to the above discussion of power over life and death as shown by the fear of the Heath cottage residents when the alarm goes off in the middle of the night. It is the motif with which the narrator both starts and ends her narration and it runs constantly throughout the text. Fire imagery in *Beasts* is a complicated web associated with the interlocking threads of power, passion, obsession, as well as with the ideas of sexuality, initiation and purification. Gilbert Durand analyzes the symbolism of this motif in his *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* where he speaks of different kinds of fire including "sexual fire" and "purifying fire."

At its simplest, explains Durand, fire is linked to sexuality since it is the result of a rubbing action and can represent the need for a shared warmth.[254] This can be seen as the case of the person(s) lighting the fires around campus, an idea which Gillian herself expresses when she makes the connection between the arsons and the need for love: "I had no idea who the arsonist was but her random acts seemed to me logical, like a message in code. In my journal I wrote, *She's in love, too. They scorn her. They look through her, invisible*" (*B* 22). The fires, therefore, are seen as an outlet for all the bottled up passion, confusion and obsession felt by the girl or girls who set them, a substitute for lost love. In fact, the reader can never be completely sure that Gillian herself is not the arsonist for at least some, if not all, of the small fires set around campus. She acknowledges that she was present in the library when the fire occurred there. Moreover, when the fire alarm is pulled in Gillian's residence, she takes care to remark that she did not think she had ever really been a suspect, as if she were proud of the fact. Not to mention her refusal to accompany her friend to the Psych Center because of the way it would stigmatize her.

[254] Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 1992) 385.

Fire and the theme of initiation are closely linked for Durand in what he identifies as the "sacrifice – death – ressurrection" sequence.[255] Certainly, Gillian's story corresponds to the first part of the initiation scheme: sacrifice followed by death. Durand also mentions that initiates often undergo sexual mutilation and that many traditions reflect the image of initiatory death by tearing.[256] The college girls in *Beasts*, being initiated into the ways of the world, are first taken advantage of sexually. Then, as a result, they suffer a mental tearing apart, an emotional breakdown. However, Oates likes to recount the stories of strong female characters who are able to survive. Gillian is no exception and like Ovid's Philomela to whom she is compared, *she* ultimately gets her revenge by provoking a fire in the Harrow house which consumes both the building and its inhabitants and thus assures her psychological rebirth, though not without some ambiguity since she does commit several criminal acts in the process.

Durand admits that fire imagery possesses a certain ambivalence due to the fact that along with its erotic allusions, it also embodies and transmits the intention of purification.[257] Indeed, in Gillian's final act, she becomes the high priestess, sacrificing Andre Harrow, Dorcas and Xipe Totec, therefore assuring her own resurrection. Interestingly, Dorcas's parrot is named Xipe Totec, after the Aztec life-death-rebirth deity. Whereas the campus arsons leading up to it are exclusively outlets of sexual passion, the final fire at the Harrows's house both expresses Gillian's passion and purges her of it. In this way, Gillian is released from her submissive sexual role through the death of her oppressors.

A parallel can be drawn in *Beasts* between the process of artistic creation and that of individualization. Gillian is literally a nondescript young woman; the novella provides very little in the way of physical description of her. Gillian describes other people in evocative language. Her friend Dominique is "beautiful" and "husky" (*B* 6), Dorcas has "russet-red hair

[255] Durand 351.
[256] Durand 352.
[257] Durand 196.

and the unmistakably indolent, luxuriant motions of a mature woman's body" (*B* 10). Yet Gillian reveals nothing very specific about her own physical being. The name Gillian is of Latin origin, meaning "soft-haired; youthful."[258] We know that Gillian is "small," weighing "only ninety pounds" (*B* 7) and that she has long hair which she cuts at the end of the story. Gillian's attraction to the mature artist, Dorcas, is somehow connected to her own artistic impulses: "I never knew whether they [Dorcas's wooden figures] excited me as works of art – for I thought of myself as an artist too, a poet – or whether they repulsed me" (*B* 16). However, her attraction is also mixed up with her feelings of inadequacy. She identifies with the woman's crude wooden totems because "my body was like that of the totem titled, 'Girl'" which was "an angular adolescent girl of my approximate height, five feet, with a blank, rather simian face, a small bald head, tiny Dixie-cup breasts, and an angular, bony pelvis" (*B* 16). The comparison becomes more extreme when Gillian cuts off her braids and offers them as a gift and Dorcas decides to affix them to the head of one of her sculptures. At one point, Penelope's mother mistakes Gillian for Sybil (*B* 108). This is more than just a social gaffe. It effectively points to the fact that the girls have lost their individuality and are simply performing a role, a function as the weakest component of the Harrows' threesome. In her final act, Gillian becomes the creator, taking responsibility for forming her own self.

Fire and related imagery are meaningful not because they are original, but rather because, as Durand has outlined, they reflect the obsessions of a collective unconscious and are both diachronic and transcultural.[259] Gillian's story is ultimately one of a young woman's initiation into the ways of the world, adulthood and the ambiguity that accompanies them. Yes,

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[258] Amanda Elizabeth Barden, *The Complete Reverse-Dictionary of Baby Names: Baby Names Made Easy* (New York: Fireside, 2009) 207.

[259] This is not the first time Oates has recourse to the destructive characteristics of fire. For example, Susana Araújo discusses the story "Plot," collected in *Marriages and Infidelities*, in which the narrator commits suicide by setting fire to himself at his parents' mansion. Araújo points out the intertextual link to the use of fire by well-known metafictional fabulators such as John Barth, Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco: "By connecting the image of fire with the primordial space of home, Oates also hints at the pyromaniac genealogy of the Fabulators's canons." "Marriages and Infidelities: Joyce Carol Oates's Way Out of the Labyrinths of Metafiction," *Women's Studies* 33 (2004): 117.

Gillian is a victim, abandoned by her parents and friends and taken advantage of by a professor. However, her own inner obsessions set her up for this victimization. She cannot be regarded as entirely innocent, and, in the end she is the one who rolls the smoldering cigarette between the cushions of the couch and surrounds it with burnable things.

Whereas the other three works in this study are all comprised of multiple viewpoints, *Beasts* frustratingly employs only one, masking access to the "truth." There is no point of comparison from which to analyze Gillian's relations to other people or changes in her behavior over time. In this way, her obsessions are foregrounded. The belief that the essence of the human is to be divided from other humans and that longing is one of the results of this problematic relationship leads Oates to consider obsession as a natural human emotion, one that cannot be satisfied, but only considered through the medium of art. In this coming of age story, Gillian is obsessed with "mysteries" related to her own desires and takes the steps necessary to get what she wants. The question of the extent of Gillian's complicity in her victimization remains finally unanswerable. In *Rape: A Love Story*, however, as the next chapter will show, Teena and Bethie's obsession takes a different form, originating in the intense feeling of insecurity and incomprehension brought about by the violent attack they are subjected to. They must come to terms with the random quality of the violence visited upon them.

Chapter IV
Rape: A Love Story:
The Bewildering Case of the Missing Meaning

"What is the 'grotesque' – and what is 'horror' – in art? And why do these seemingly repellent states of mind possess, for some, an abiding attraction?" (*HTG* 303). Oates poses this question as the starting point to her "Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque." Though she offers no definitive response to the question, she does observe that "this predilection for art that promises we will be frightened by it, shaken by it, at times repulsed by it seems to be as deeply imprinted in the human psyche as the counter-impulse toward daylight, rationality, scientific skepticism, truth and the 'real'" (*HTG* 305). Just as there is no answer to the question of why we are attracted to art that frightens us, there is also, by extension, no answer to the question of why we are attracted to dangerous situations and violent people. Oates calls this "the unspeakable taboo – that evil is not always repellent but frequently attractive; that it has the power to make of us not simply victims, as nature and accident do, but active accomplices" (*HTG* 305-306). Violence surrounds us, but the familiarity is of no help towards fathoming its origins. As Oates remarks, "the outward aspects of horror are variable, multiple, infinite – the inner, inaccessible" (*HTG* 307). Thus, though the roots of this attraction may continue to elude us, its effects on our lives are very tangible indeed and it is on these effects that Oates focuses a great deal of her attention.

As a writer concerned with depicting contemporary society, especially the repercussions of violence in the lives of her characters, Oates has consistently centered stories around the sexual experiences of women. Peter Dickinson identifies "sex" and "death" as two of "the most important organizing themes for Joyce Carol Oates's literary oeuvre."[260] Marilyn Wesley, writing in 1992, claims that incest "is, in fact, one of the most important motifs in

[260] Peter Dickinson, "Riding in Cars with Boys: Reconsidering *Smooth Talk*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 36.3 (2008): 211.

Oates' fiction," observing that "of Joyce Carol Oates' twenty-two novels, eight – *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them*[261] (1969), *Do With Me What You Will* (1973), *Childwold* (1976), *Marya* (1986), and *You Must Remember This* (1987) – are concerned with relations incestuous in tone, if not in fact, between young girls and their fathers or figurative fathers."[262] In another reading of female sexuality in Oates's fiction, Creighton and Binette discuss the involvement in manipulative sexual relationships of female characters in six novels: *them*, *Do With Me What You Will*, *Childwold*, *Marya: A Life*, *You Must Remember This*, and *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* (1990). These relationships run the gamut from women forced into submissive sexual roles to those who "use sexuality to further their purposes."[263] However, no matter what form the sexual initiation of the characters takes, Creighton and Binette claim that each of these female characters is allowed to make a choice: "Though they may not have much choice over their initiation into sexuality, they are able to exercise their own will in choosing how and to what degree to accept sexuality into their lives."[264]

Not all Oates's characters, however, are allowed to choose the manner in which they accept sexuality into their lives; stories involving rape are a prominent subset among her stories touching on female sexual experience. In many of the occurrences, the act goes undenounced. In *Solstice*, after being beaten and raped by an aquaintance of her friend Sheila, Monica confides in her friend but refuses to report the assault to the police:

> Sheila cradled her head, rocked her, asked if she wanted to be taken to a doctor. If she wanted Sheila to report that bastard to the police.
>
> Because he'd forced her, after all. Technically and legally it was rape.
>
> Monica started laughing, then Monica was crying again, huddled in Sheila's arms.

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[261] Oates does not capitalize the title of this novel. The "them" to which the title refers is not a well-defined group of the kind that could be identified by a proper noun. Rather it indicates the "them" of "us and them," in other words, everything that is other.

[262] Marilyn C. Wesley, "Father-Daughter Incest as Social Transgression: A Feminist Reading of Joyce Carol Oates," *Women's Studies* 21.3 (1992): 251.

[263] Creighton and Binette 449.

[264] Creighton and Binette 451.

> No she didn't want to be taken to a doctor and no she didn't want to report Win to the police it was her own fault primarily, just let it go.[265]

Among numerous examples, there are also the disturbing double rape of the orphan Little Goldie in *Bellefleur* by Gideon and his brother while on their journey to bring the young girl home to live with their family and the incestuous relationship in *Mysteries of Winterthurn* between Justice Kilgarvan and his eldest daughter which results in the deaths of a dozen or so infants. Finally, there is the even more disturbing example of Grace, protagonist of the early story "Pastoral Blood,"[266] who offers herself to be sexually used and subsequently gang-raped as part of her death wish.[267] Indeed, the prevalence of the rape trope in Oates's fiction seems to support Christine Atkins's observation that institutionalized misogyny has resulted in rape becoming a rite of passage: "The result of such institutionalization of violence against women is that women writers such as Oates have collectively revised the definition of the modern female coming-of-age story, making rape part and parcel in the development of most girls and women."[268] Even in *Beasts*, though the word itself is never used, rape is hinted at. When Gillian finds the pornographic photographs and magazines in Andre Harrow's study, she is surprised to find her own likeness and claims that because the Harrows were in the habit of drugging her, she remembers nothing of the sexual acts recorded by the camera. *Rape: A Love Story* is unique among these examples because it is the only occurrence of rape with which the justice system gets involved. Furthermore, the rape occupies a prominent position in the structure of the novella. In addition, the act is responsible for the coming-of-age of a character

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[265] Joyce Carol Oates, *Solstice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 1985) 203.
[266] Joyce Carol Oates, "Pastoral Blood," *By The North Gate* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1963) 75-92.
[267] The gang-rape passage is very cryptic and occurs, if indeed it does occur, between the lines of one paragraph on page 90 of the Fawcett Crest edition. In "A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates's First Collection," Greg Johnson reads the passage in this way: "Grace's ultimate degradation – she is apparently gang-raped by a group of sailors in a riverfront saloon – is followed by recuperation in a hospital before she returns to 'civilized' life" (12).
[268] Christine E. Atkins, "'This is What You Deserve': Rape as Rite of Passage in Joyce Carol Oates's 'Naked,'" *Women's Studies* 31 (2002): 436-437.

who was not actually the rape victim, but the young Bethie who witnesses the attack and is intimately involved with its after-effects on her mother.

Rape: A Love Story recalls an earlier Oates story entitled "Naked" in which a middle-aged woman "hiking alone in a suburban wildlife preserve two miles from her home" is attacked by "a small pack of black children."[269] The children "beat her, [tear] her clothes from her, [empty] her pockets, all the while squealing and laughing as if what they [are doing is] only in play" and run off, taking her clothes and all her belongings with them (*HOS* 124). Like *Rape: A Love Story*, this story begins with the aggression and deals with its aftermath. There are, of course, differences between the two works. Concerning the assault, there is no sexual intercourse involved in the attack upon the unnamed main character of "Naked." However, the attack can still be considered rape in the larger sense of the word as an outrageous violation. Likewise, both female characters struggle to find a meaning behind their experiences, but are ultimately unable to make sense of them: "But why had they hated her so," asks the protagonist of "Naked," "to beat her as well as rob her, and to humiliate her by stripping her clothes from her?" (*HOS* 126). The major difference between the stories concerns the communication of one's experience with others. The protagonist of "Naked" is preoccupied with how she will be viewed if her victimization is made public, or even simply made known to her family. The successful wife of a prominent professor, this woman is not naïve enough to think that justice can be achieved in her case. She believes that if she calls the police, she will be blamed in part for what happened to her and will hereafter be seen only as a victim. She ultimately decides to keep the attack secret from everyone, and to sneak back home and clean herself up without being seen. In *Rape: A Love Story*, however, Teena is not afforded the luxury of deciding whether or not to make her rape public. Before she regains consciousness in the hospital, her experience has already been made public and the cogs of

[269] Joyce Carol Oates, "Naked," *Heat and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1991) 123. Hereafter abbreviated as *HOS*.

the justice system set in motion. Teena also initially agrees to testify, believing that her version of events cannot be disputed. The length of the novella form also allows for more development and Oates is able to explore the extent of the effects of the rape on the victims' lives over a longer period of time. Whereas the woman in "Naked" only imagines what would happen to her were she to come forward, we actually "see" what happens to Teena when she does so. Teena's story thus seems to legitimize the nameless woman's decision to keep silent about her experience.

In her article on "Naked," Atkins discusses the way in which "cultural rape scripts" serve "to trap women as eroticized victims" both through "the cumulative effect of language" and "through the structuring of narrative." "Narrating a woman's experience of sexual violence as a victim and/or survivor almost always works to reinscribe women's inherent powerlessness," explains Atkins. The result of "scripts that construct women as victims is that such inscriptions naturalize, and serve to justify, violence against women." In addition, whether the rape is placed at the beginning, middle or end of a narrative has an effect on the way it is portrayed: "Positioning rape at the end of a text constructs a narrative tension that is not unlike that of sexual tension." Texts that start with the point of rape, on the other hand, "suggest that rape is a necessary milestone to pass in order to achieve maturity."[270] *Rape: A Love Story* and "Naked" both follow this latter structure. "Taking place after an attack," writes Atkins, "much of 'Naked' focuses less on the fear associated with violence and more on the fear of being victimized by cultural rape scripts themselves – particularly the belief that women want or deserve rape, and that women are sexual objects before they are individuals."[271] "Naked" can be read as a "coming-of-age story" because "as the protagonist walks home, she realizes not only the extent of her own oppression on a cultural level, but

[270] Atkins 435.
[271] Atkins 436.

also in the relationship she has with her husband."[272] Cultural conceptions of rape also play an important part in influencing the characters' decisions in *Rape: A Love Story* where Teena's despair is augmented by the lack of support she receives from the community.

A related theme is a feeling of dislocation with regards to periods in one's personal history. Oates's early story "Splendid Architecture"[273] offers six glimpses of different stages in a man's life as defined by the spaces he lives in. Certain recurrent Oates themes such as the succession of different selves and the difficulty of knowing others are developed in this story. The protagonist, a man who becomes a successful architect, is plagued throughout the different stages of his life by a recurring nightmare of being locked out of his house. The only period during which he avoids this disturbing dream is that in which he lives in the house he designed for himself, pointing to the idea that one is the most at ease when able to live a life of one's own design. The notions of the changing self and the need for control are consistently visible throughout Oates's writing; *Rape: A Love Story* is a particularly appropriate example. Oates's Teena Maguire also experiences life as a succession of different selves. Teena is understandably different before and after the attack, yet the "after" period can be parsed even further: carefree Teena of "before"; wounded, dazed Teena of "after" in the hospital; anguished, uncomprehending Teena once memory has returned; Teena with faith in the justice system; Teena who has lost faith in the justice system and is frightened for her own safety and that of her family; and finally a newly carefree traveling Teena engaged in a life of her own making. Bethie's life is also clearly divided into parts which parallel her experience. For Bethie, the traumatic experience of her mother's violent gang rape and subsequent hospitalization clearly marks the boundary between phases of her life. Her life is now split up

[272] Atkins 441. Atkins reads "Naked" as "fiction that inscribes violence as a vehicle for women to attain a greater sense of agency." She cites other examples – "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," *Man Crazy*, and "Haunted" – which she claims also "orchestrate for their female protagonists violent initiations that, if they do survive them, are constructed as a necessary part of their coming-of-age" (444).
[273] Joyce Carol Oates, "Splendid Architecture," *The Seduction and Other Stories* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975) 68-87. This story originally appeared in *Antioch Review* 28.3 (Fall 1968): 305-324.

into "before" and "after": "As soon as your mother and you were dragged into the boathouse at Rocky Point Park you began to exist in *after*. Never again could you exist in *before*."[274] In addition, the experience contributes to a premature passage from childhood to adulthood: "the vigil at St. Mary's. The end of your childhood" (*RLS* 53). Though it might seem at first glance to be incongruous, a parallel can indeed be drawn between "Splendid Architecture" and *Rape: A Love Story*. Teena and Bethie's wish to be rid of the rapists is actualized with the help of John Dromoor. In this way, the women are able to regain control and live a life of their own design. Thus, in addition to exploring the very real problem of cultural attitudes towards rape, *Rape: A Love Story* raises several classic Oates interrogations about the mysteries of life, including the difficulty of comprehending motives, the problematic nature of truth and the elusiveness of human reaction and attraction.

1.4.1. Why? The Unanswerable Question

More than the physical fact of her painful rape and beating, the source of Teena Maguire's anguish has to do with her bewilderment at why she was treated in such a brutal way; she cannot find any meaning behind the event. When Teena wakes from her coma in the hospital she does not initially remember what it was that caused her to be there: "What had happened to her was vague as an explosion or a car crash or a building collapsing on her head" (*RLS* 48). Memory returns slowly: "By her twelfth day in St. Mary's, Teena Maguire is beginning to remember something of what happened to her. [...] She has heard the word *assault*. It's possible that, given the nature of her injuries, she is thinking *rape*. Yet her knowledge is vague" (*RLS* 53). When her knowledge of the events does finally fully return, it is as if she has received another blow to the face:

[274] Joyce Carol Oates, *Rape: A Love Story* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003) 44. Hereafter abbreviated as *RLS*.

> One day she knew. One hour.
> Must've been a window open. And something flew in, frenzied wings beating at her face.
> She remembered then. Not all of it, but enough.
> Through the walls of several rooms in Grandma's house you heard her cry out as if she'd been hit another time.
> [...]
> You ran into the room. There was Momma who'd been walking with her cane, now sitting on the edge of a chair rocking slowly back and forth pressing her fists into her eyes. You saw now clearly that Teena Maguire was no longer a woman whom other women envied, or glanced at in interest and admiration out on the street. You saw that she did not want you to come near her, to touch her.
> "Why? Why would they want to hurt *me*?" (*RLS* 60)

Unfortunately for Teena, her question proves difficult, if not impossible, to answer.[275] Even the rapists themselves cannot explain: "They were not exactly sorry for what they'd done because they could not clearly recall any single moment in which they had made a conscious decision to 'do' anything to anyone whether sexual, violent, rough-play, or whatever, and so they did not consider themselves responsible, somehow" (*RLS* 113). Not only do they not take responsibility for their actions, they also begin to think of themselves as victims: "This was a war, like. These people trying to destroy them. Not just them, their parents. And Jimmy DeLucca, he'd been shot down dead the other night by a NFPD cop off-duty!" (*RLS* 114).

In the chapter entitled "Self-Defense" in which Dromoor shoots DeLucca, the following statement is delivered from the point of view of Dromoor: "Must've been like this. The chronology of events. What links events is never so clear as the events themselves" (*RLS* 98). This idea points to the ephemerality of motives, reinforcing the difficulty of ever satisfactorily answering the question "Why?" Indeed, how is it possible to attribute motive to an unplanned event? Reflecting on the DeLucca shooting incident, Dromoor thinks, "Such

[275] In "A Barbarous Eden," Greg Johnson suggests that Oates's story "Boys at a Picnic" is an early example of the depiction of motiveless violence in her work (6). "Boys at a Picnic" is collected in *By The North Gate* (65-74). In this story, three teenage boys are fleeing from rural Texas to an unnamed big city in a car stolen from one of their fathers. The action described takes place over the course of one afternoon during which one of the boys murders a gas station attendant before stealing the money from the cash register and another murders a young girl at a picnic in order to steal her billfold. Nevertheless, highly immoral and tenuous though it is, there is, contrary to *Rape: A Love Story*, an unvoiced motive for these boys' crimes: the desire to acquire money to pay for such pleasures as beer and popcorn. However, similar to the rapists in *Rape: A Love Story*, the teenagers do not apparently feel any remorse for what they have done.

things aren't planned. Definitely, they are not rehearsed. You get one time, only" (*RLS* 98). The same appears to be true concerning the rapists' act of aggression for which there does not seem to be any particular meaning, it simply happened, the result of a specific accumulation of time- and location-related factors. The rape took place late on the fourth of July. Teena, her daughter and their friends had spent the day playing, eating, drinking and dancing. In the words of Bethie: "It was meant to be a silly-happy time. An empty-headed time" (*RLS* 26). The fact that the crime occurs against this good-natured, celebratory background accentuates its barbaric, aleatory nature all the more, reminding one of the indiscriminate nature of everyday life. Bethie conceives of the experience as a question of bad luck: "How a life is decided. How a life is ended. / Good luck, bad luck. Purely luck" (*RLS* 16); "Good luck, bad luck. Hit by lightning, spared by lightning" (*RLS* 17). A few innocent decisions led to Teena and Bethie being alone in the park late at night in the path of a gang of young men under the influence of drugs and restless, looking for some action. Bethie describes the haphazard nature of the situation and the several possibilities for changing course that were available: if only Teena had given in to Bethie and stayed awhile longer at the party (*RLS* 16), if only Teena had accepted Ray Casey's invitation to stay the night (*RLS* 17), if only Teena had agreed to let Casey drive them home (*RLS* 22), if only Teena had not insisted on walking through the park. However, none of these decisions were made and the gang rape happened. The only motive given in the text is the hollow, unsatisfactory one that the rapists were a bunch of guys looking for something to do, thinking nothing "beyond the frenzied act of doing" (*RLS* 23): "Guys who'd been drifting around the park for hours looking for trouble. Looking for some fun. Drinking beer and tossing cans into the lagoon and all the firecrackers they had, they'd set off" (*RLS* 4). The discussion of motive leads once again back to the familiar Oatesian realm of night-side impulses. The rapists were not thinking: "They had not had time to think and they were not in a state to think" (*RLS* 23). However, though this leads

to Teena and Bethie's trauma, it also ironically saves their lives: "If her rapists had been thinking, not so drunk, or so drugged, not so excited, they'd have made sure she was dead. And her twelve-year-old daughter who'd crawled behind the stacked boats to hide" (*RLS* 23). If this is another depiction of rape as a rite of passage as described by Atkins, it is indeed a brutal one. However, Oates adds another layer to the situation in that the rapists are not the only ones operating in the night-side realm. Teena, in her decision to walk through the park, also gives in to unconscious impulses, the desire to relish in nostalgic memories:

> It would have been a ten-minute walk through Rocky Point Park, from Casey's house to your house. Except Momma wanted to take the lagoon path. Where it was *so pretty*.
>
> Saying in her happy-wistful voice you dreaded, "Your father used to take the three of us out in a rowboat on the lagoon, Bethie, do you remember? Sometimes just him and you in a canoe. You took your dolls along." (*RLS* 24-25)

Thus, in a scene reminiscent of Gillian and Andre Harrow's first kiss in *Beasts*, Teena leads her daughter down a darkened path where "half the lights had been broken or were burned out" (*RLS* 24).

Therefore, by foregrounding the incomprehensible nature of impulsive decisions on both the parts of the rapists and their victims, Oates implies that "Why?" is always an unanswerable question. However, the "truth" about the rapists' motives is not the only "truth" in the story that remains inaccessible. The justice system will also fail to establish the "truth" of the facts in the case. Though John Dromoor is an official officer of the law who "knows" the answer to the crime, this is not enough to ensure justice through legal means. The fact that the crime is motive-less is a large part of the problem.

1.4.2. Why? The Difficulty of Being Believed

Not only does Oates's rape victim have difficulty coming to terms with her traumatic experience, she also has trouble getting others to accept the truth about what happened. The facts of the crime, aside from the nonexistent motive discussed above, are known by the victims, the police and the reader from the very beginning. Thus reader interest in this story is maintained not through a gradual revelation of facts about the case, but by the possibility of justice: the reader desires to see the rapists brought to justice and wonders whether or not this will happen. To the reader who knows what "really" happened, this does not seem like it should be problematic. How can there be any doubt that the woman was beaten and raped? How can her attackers not be brought to justice when she can identify them? However, as early as the first chapter, certain paratextual[276] and textual elements indicate that justice will be hard to come by. Teena's difficulty with being believed has two sources. On the one hand, there is the matter of public opinion. On the other hand, there is the necessity of proving the case before the court.

The title of the first chapter is "She Had It Coming" (*RLS* 3). Thus, from the opening of the novella it is clear that Teena will not get a fair trial in the court of public opinion. In addition, Bethie reports "some of the things that would be said of [her] mother" such as:

> That woman! What kind of mother would drag her young daughter with her to a drunken party and then on foot through Rocky Point Park at that hour, what kind of poor judgment, she's lucky it wasn't worse what happened to her, and what happened to the girl . . . (*RLS* 6)

For many members of the community, the person who exercises poor judgment is responsible for their own victimization. With this supplementary information the question of whether or not the rapists will be brought to justice takes on new importance as many citizens of Niagara

[276] The "paratext" is Gérard Genette's term for "those elements that make a text a book and cause it to be considered as such by its readers." *Seuils* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987) 7-8. My translation: "ce par quoi un texte se fait livre et se propose comme tel à ses lecteurs." The paratext is composed of the *péritexte* (title, preface, chapter titles, notes, etc.) and the *épitexte* (interviews, correspondance, journal entries) (11).

Falls seem to blame Teena for what happened to her. Society blaming the victim, especially female victims of sex-linked crimes, is a contemporary problem linked to patriarchal discourse which Oates considers to be a carry-over from nineteenth century mentalities. Cara Chell reads Oates's *Mysteries of Winterthurn* as a critique of nineteenth century patriarchal society's tendency to blame female victims for the crimes perpetrated against them.[277] Oates goes further than simply depicting this societal prejudice, she actually denounces certain of the nation's most beloved authors for perpetuating it in their fiction. In her article on Modernist representations of women, Oates analyzes how, in spite of its many real innovations concerning form and language, "Modernist fiction carries over deep-rooted nineteenth-century prejudices of a distinctly bourgeois sort,"[278] especially concerning "what being *female* involves" (*PA* 39). Oates reads Joe Christmas's murder of his lover Johanna Burden in Faulkner's *Light In August* as an instance of blaming the victim for the crime as Christmas is presented as not morally guilty due to the corrupting influence of the nymphomaniac woman. In Oates's reading, "Faulkner so manipulates his characters that Johanna provokes Joe Christmas into murdering her in what might be seen as self-defense, since his [Faulkner's] concern is to provide his hero with an appropriate catalyst, a guilty cause, for the act of murder" (*PA* 61). Johanna, writes Oates, "insults her lover's precarious sense of his own sexuality by keeping intact her *inward autonomy*. These are vicious and even demented sentiments which, if followed to a logical conclusion, would indict the victim for having been the 'cause' of the crime" (*PA* 60). Oates's *Rape: A Love Story* reminds us that blaming the female victim for the sexual crime perpetrated against her is neither a phenomenon relegated to the nineteenth century, nor a tendency that petered out during the

[277] Cara Chell, "Un-Tricking the Eye: Joyce Carol Oates and the Feminist Ghost Story," *Arizona Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1985): 5-23.
[278] Joyce Carol Oates, "'At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her': Images of Women in Yeats, Lawrence, Faulkner," *The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews* (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1983) 35. Hereafter abbreviated as *PA*. The title of Oates's article is taken from Faulkner's *Light In August* and refers to Joe Christmas's rape of Johanna Burden.

Modernist period, but a continuing issue in contemporary society. Public opinion thus fails to support Teena and from early on there are indications that the justice system will not help her either.

Bethie and Teena gradually come to realize that it is not enough to have endured an injustice. In order to get reparation through legal means, this injustice must be subsequently proven in a court of law. Bethie is the first to interact with the police regarding the investigation:

> If Teena Maguire is well enough, she will be required to answer questions at the hearing. Your mother's testimony is more crucial than yours, the detectives have told you. Without her testimony, the case against the suspects will be circumstantial, weak.
>
> You don't know why. You don't understand why this is so. They hurt your mother so badly, beat her and tore her insides and left her to bleed to death on the boathouse floor.
>
> Yes but this has to be proven. In a court of law.
>
> Not enough that it happened. That Teena Maguire almost died. It has to be proven, too. (*RLS* 56)

In order for the experience to be established as fact, it must be proven in court. Otherwise, Bethie understands, one might consider it did not actually occur. Legal language does not coincide with Bethie's understanding of her experience. There is even an ambiguous term for the rapists: "'Suspects,' they were called. As if they hadn't done what they'd done to you and your mother but were only 'suspected' of doing it!" (*RLS* 41). Bethie's incomprehension when faced with the brutal knowledge that a court of law might not recognize what happened to her and her mother is later mirrored by Teena's shock after she realizes that the truth is not obvious to others at the preliminary hearing.

For the reader, for the victims and for the police, there is no mystery as to who committed the crime. Teena and Bethie can identify their assailants; they are "neighborhood guys" (*RLS* 4). The logical thing to do, then, once Teena's body has healed, is to press charges and go to court. The women put their faith in the justice system. Bethie's grandmother is sure: "*those animals* are guilty, *justice will be done*, they will be tried,

convicted, sentenced to prison *for a long time*" (*RLS* 57). However, the legal proceedings fail Teena. During the preliminary hearing, it becomes apparent that the account of the violent experience is distorted by the logic of the justice system. Bethie's previously quoted astonishment at hearing the rapists called "suspects" effectively embodies the interpretation dilemma that will be foregrounded during the hearing: Truth exists, but how does one find it? How can a third party distinguish between two conflicting interpretations of an event?

Just one glance around the courtroom is enough to alert Dromoor to the potential problems of presenting the case in such a distorted setting: "Dromoor knew it would be bad. His gut instinct was to wish to hell he had no part in it" (*RLS* 64). He understands that the combination of the formidable defense attorney, "the mostly hostile crowd" and the completely transformed clean-shaven defendants mean trouble for the victims and the female deputy prosecutor (*RLS* 64-65). This feeling is only compounded when the judge enters and exchanges "a nod of greeting" with the lead defense attorney (*RLS* 67). In this story, the face of the justice system is represented by judge Schpiro. Throughout the lengthy chapter recounting the hearing,[279] Schpiro is described as patronizing and rude, not only to the female assistant prosecutor who he condescendingly teases in order to get a reaction from the crowd (*RLS* 67) and Dromoor who he interrupts to correct his grammar (*RLS* 70), but also to the victim herself, telling her to remove her dark glasses because she is not outside (*RLS* 71).

Despite the fact that "there were eyewitness testimonies from the two victims," "DNA and other forensic evidence linking these defendants and three others to the crime" and "a ninth defendant [...] who had confessed to his role in the crime and would be a state's witness against the others" (*RLS* 67-68), the defense is able to offer a contrasting narrative of the events of that night. Kirkpatrick's alternate narrative goes as follows:

> Admittedly there had been sex. Multiple acts of sex. But the sex had been entirely consensual. Martine Maguire had known each of the defendants and

[279] In a work of thirty-seven chapters, it is one of only five consisting of ten or more pages. Twenty-nine chapters are of five or less pages.

> was "well known" by them. The sex had been for money and the deal had gone wrong (Maguire had wanted more money than she'd been promised, or the young men had less to give her, this part of the disagreement was unclear), and the alleged victim, who had been drinking at the time, became verbally and then physically aggressive against her young clients. The young men, admittedly under the influence of alcohol and controlled substances, had fought back when she attacked them, but had not hurt her seriously; they had left the boathouse, and other, unidentified young men had entered, drawn by the commotion. The severe beating and instances of rape must have happened at that time. (*RLS* 73)

The only witnesses are a twelve-year-old girl too young to be trusted and a participant in the acts who already has a long criminal record and so is not to be trusted either. How can justice be achieved when the facts can be interpreted in opposite ways?

It is apparent, then, that violence in the story does not emanate uniquely from one source and remain one-directional. In court, the defense's theories that the sexual acts were not rape but in fact consensual sex for money are experienced by the victim as another form of psychological violence. Following the hearing, Teena withdraws into herself and refuses to cooperate further with the prosecution:

> It was the end for Teena Maguire in Niagara Falls, she could not bear it. Never would she testify now. Never would she reenter any courtroom. No faith in any fucking courtroom! No faith in any fucking prosecutors, judges. [...]
> *Leave me alone can't you for Christ's sake. I'm sick. I'm so tired. I can't give a damn about you or anybody else*. (*RLS* 81-82)

The prosecuting attorney also feels victimized, like she has been "bushwacked. Never saw it coming. No more than the rape victim had seen it coming" (*RLS* 86). The defense attorney shrewdly sums up the problem: "You could distract and confuse the jurors, Kirkpatrick said. Because there is a wish in the heart of mankind to be distracted and confused. Truth is but one attraction, and not always the most powerful" (*RLS* 142). His astute assessment of human nature allows him to capitalize on human failings for his own financial gain. Kirkpatrick charges a significant amount of money for his services. The narrator tells us that his fees are bringing financial hardship to some of the defendants' families. More importantly, the alternate theory he expounds before the court is unethical because he presumably knows it to

be complete fiction of his own making. Certainly this alternate account of the events did not originate from the defendants themselves as they praise Kirkpatrick's genius at suggesting it. His theory seems unlikely, but improbable things happen every day. The fact that there was no motive for the crime makes it possible for the defense to present another interpretation of the events. The defense thus makes the question of motive of primary importance and turns the fact of lack of motive for the rapists to their advantage by creating another narrative for the jury and the public to latch on to, no matter how implausible. Kirkpatrick creates a motive where none actually existed. The human desire for meaning takes precedence over events with no meaning. As Oates herself wryly observes in one of her essays, "we want to believe! *We are the species that clamors to be lied to*."[280] The question of truth is central to the novella, embodied, as I have mentioned, in the following sentence: "What links events is never so clear as the events themselves" (*RLS* 98). An "event" can be described as something that occurs in a certain place during a particular interval of time. An event is no less real than what causes it though it is infinitely easier to describe. What links events together – the space between them, the exact nature of their relationship – is that which is open to interpretation and therefore problematic. In this case the conflict of interpretation demeans the essence of the law by preventing justice from being done.

Not only does Teena Maguire struggle to comprehend the motives behind her attackers' actions, once she has mentally acknowledged the ordeal she must also struggle with the unwillingness of others to believe her. The court of public opinion, Oates reminds us, is equally if not more damaging than the court of justice.[281] As Bethie and her mother are caught up in the police investigation, Bethie reflects that it "had begun without [her] knowledge, like

[280] Oates, "Fiction in Fact" 77. Earlier on the same page, Oates makes the following observations about eyewitness testimony: "Putative eyewitnesses in criminal cases are notoriously unreliable, yet juries are powerfully, sometimes lethally, persuaded by their testimonies; people will adamantly swear to the truth of something that didn't in fact happen, and will refuse to change their minds even when their mistakes are pointed out to them."

[281] This theme will reemerge in Oates's later novel *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* in which Skyler remains a suspect in the realm of the blogosphere even once a convicted sex offender has confessed to the crime.

a great eye opening" (*RLS* 42). However, once again, this is an eye whose sight proves ineffective, helpless to see the "truth" in a court of justice. The rapists perpetrate physical as well as psychological violence upon Teena and Bethie Maguire. Once they are arrested and charges are brought against them, they engage in a ruthless campaign of psychological intimidation. In the week before the hearing, Teena finds a threatening message "in tarry black letters on a piece of dirty cardboard [...] propped against the side door of her mother's house," one of the rapists' sisters threatens Bethie in the 7-eleven, and Bethie finds the "stiffened body" of her grandmother's cat in the alley behind the house (*RLS* 61-63). After the hearing, they take to cruising periodically past the house, shouting lewd obscenities at the inhabitants.

Luckily, Teena has a small community to help pull her through, including someone willing to do what it takes to help her survive. When the legal process fails to improve Teena's life, Dromoor steps in. In "Donor Organs," Oates's young protagonist Jason T. thinks "there is no code of ethics intrinsic in humankind there is only codified law."[282] Later on he remembers the words of a philosophy professor who "pointed out that 'wrong' is a subjective moral claim and whose claim? by whose authority [*sic*] such a claim over the individual?"[283] The discrepancy between codified law and subjective moral views of "wrong" is a central concern in *Rape: A Love Story* which blurs the lines between right and wrong by depicting Dromoor's actions in a positive light, linking them to the notion of love. Before moving on to a discussion of the seemingly incongruous "love" part of the story, the question of justice will be discussed in more detail.

[282] Oates, "Donor Organs" 300.
[283] Oates, "Donor Organs" 301.

1.4.2.1. Is Justice Achieved?

Paring down the elements of *Rape: A Love Story* to the essential chronological details of its plot results in something like this: Teena Maguire is gang raped and severely beaten by a group of neighborhood boys. After initially agreeing to testify in court against the young men, she loses confidence in the ability of the system to bring her justice. Out on bail, the young men continue to harrass and frighten Teena and her daughter, Bethie. Bethie appeals to Dromoor who proceeds to "take care" of the defendants one by one. With her tormenters dead, Teena regains the ability to live.

Responding to a question about the origins of her subject matter in a 1978 interview, Oates explained that "a concern with law seemed to spring naturally out of the thinking many of us were doing in the sixties: What is the relationship between 'law' and civilization, what hope has civilization without 'law,' and yet what hope has civilization *with* law as it has developed in our tradition?"[284] These questions are still pertinent thirty years later when applied to the discussion of *Rape: A Love Story*. As previously discussed, the lack of identifiable motive makes the event difficult for the actors in the justice system (judge, jury) to conceptualize. Thus, as I have shown, Oates links lack of motive in this case to manipulation of "justice." The inability of the court to "justly" treat the case is expressly linked to the fact that there is no motive for the crime. Our legal system, this seems to show, is designed to handle only phenomena that can be clearly and rationally explained through language. Yet, so much of lived experience, as Oates depicts it, belongs to the night-side realm of felt experience that is difficult to communicate through language. Thus in the second part of *Rape: A Love Story*, the quest for justice for Teena Maguire moves to the emotional realm, allowing for the possibility of expression through action rather than through words.

[284] Robert Phillips, "The Art of Fiction No. 72: Joyce Carol Oates," *The Paris Review* 74 (Fall-Winter 1978): 12.

The question to be explored, therefore, involves the extent to which Dromoor's actions can be understood as just.

The *Webster's* dictionary defines "justice" as:

> **1a** the maintenance or administration of what is just: impartial adjustment of conflicting claims: the assignment of merited rewards or punishments: just treatment. **c** administration of law: the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity.
> **2a** the quality or characteristic of being just, impartial, or fair: Fairness, Integrity, Honesty.
> **3** conformity to truth, fact, or reason: Correctness, Rightfulness.[285]

From the standpoint of impartiality and fairness, Dromoor's biblical eye-for-an-eye solution seems just. However, his actions place him outside the law, thus taking the decision out of the hands of the community's democratic institutions tasked with determining what justice actually is in any particular case. Yet, Dromoor only decides to take personal action once he sees that the truth is being distorted by the legal proceedings; he views the preliminary hearing as having steered outside the lines, a "derailment" as he calls it (*RLS* 75). Presumably Dromoor considers that the power of the legal system loses validity when the game is not being played fairly, and cheating at the game of law is exactly what Kirkpatrick did, as outlined above.

In her article on justice and redemption in the work of African American novelist Anthony Grooms, Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard begins by briefly outlining the importance of the concept of "justice" to the history of the creation of the United States of America. The idea of justice, she reminds us, has been embedded in the conceptual framework of the nation since the Declaration of Independence: "American society was to be based on reason, on God's law and on justice, the three being closely related. [...] These principles figure in the *Declaration of Independence*, which states that the aim of any government is to make sure that the citizens will not be deprived of their 'unalienable rights,' that is to say, 'life, liberty and the pursuit of

[285] "Justice," Def. 1a, 1c, 2a, 3, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Unabridged)* (1981).

happiness.'"[286] It is the duty of social institutions to make sure that the country's citizens can enjoy these rights. It is important to remember that "in the *Declaration of Independence*, the term happiness is closely linked to a good government and to the social virtue, it is not selfish and not individualistic."[287] One could certainly argue that Teena Maguire's experience, as depicted in *Rape: A Love Story*, deprives her of some, if not all, of her unalienable rights as a citizen. Furthermore, the founding principles of the nation were based upon the understanding that "the government retains its right to call itself just only insofar as it seeks to satisfy human needs and to make sure that citizens can enjoy their unalienable rights – otherwise, citizens should seek to establish a new one."[288] This does not allow, however, for the taking of the law into one's own hands. Kurjatto-Renard also discusses the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory that establishing responsibility, the respective positions of offender and victim, is more important than the meting out of punishment for the acts.[289] However, in Teena Maguire's case, neither of these ends is achieved through the processes engaged in by the state. Certainly this is the thinking behind Dromoor's decision to intervene on Teena and Bethie's behalf in *Rape: A Love Story*. The elimination of the rapists appears to reestablish equilibrium, as Teena regains her desire to live. However, the ending of the novella undermines the reader's sense that equilibrium has been achieved, as Oates leaves us with a sense of the adult Bethie as someone profoundly sad and lonely, married to a husband who can never understand what she has experienced.

A final issue linked to the portrayal of justice in *Rape: A Love Story* has to do with the way in which the author presents the legal professions. Shaeda Isani's article on popular legal fiction and public perception of legal professions brings up some interesting points. It deals with the legal subsets of the genre identified by Michel Petit as "la fiction à substrat

[286] Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard, "'What happens to a dream deferred?': a few thoughts on justice and redemption" *GRAAT On-Line* 7 (January 2010): 216.
[287] Kurjatto-Renard 217.
[288] Kurjatto-Renard 216.
[289] Kurjatto-Renard 221.

professionnel" or FASP.[290] The point of mentioning Isani's work is not to suggest that *Rape: A Love Story* be read as FASP. Rather, Isani's article is interesting here because of its discussion of popular perceptions of legal professions. Isani analyzes data from the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* on public perceptions in America regarding legal professions and institutions. Whereas she determines that "the high esteem in which the American public holds its police force is a constant," public perception of American lawyers is extremely negative and continues to decline. Judges fall in between though they are closer to the police end of the spectrum than the lawyer end.[291] Isani notes that though "public opinion in America holds its judges in significantly higher esteem than it does its lawyers" this opinion "has registered a steady decline over the years," a change that correlates with contemporary fictional representations of legal professions.[292] Indeed, "studies in law and literature have documented the increasingly systematic negative portrayals of American lawyers in fiction."[293] Whereas this has not been consistently the case for portrayals of judges, claims Isani, certain very popular legal FASP writers do not hesitate to demonise the judiciary. In John Grisham's works, for example, "judges generally fare as badly as the lawyers he portrays."[294] Oates's depiction of the legal system in *Rape: A Love Story* corresponds to the popular perceptions of the various legal professional types as outlined by Isani: police officers are viewed positively, judges are considered to be corrupt, and defense attorneys are seen as untrustworthy.

When Judge Schpiro's and Defense Attorney Kirkpatrick's unethical behaviors are read in terms of Kurjatto-Renard and Smith's arguments about justice, and considering

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[290] Shaeda Isani, "Bench & Bar in Popular Legal Fiction: A Comparative Approach to Fictional Representations and Public Perceptions," *GRAAT On-Line* 7 (January 2010): 182. Isani cites four defining characteristics of FASP: 1) a suspense-based crime thriller novel based on the classic plot triptych of crime-suspense-dénoument; 2) contemporary; 3) belonging to the category of mass popular literature, often are bestsellers; and 4) defined by and dependent on a specialised professional environment, thus most authors are professionals-turned-novelists (183-184).
[291] Isani 192.
[292] Isani 194.
[293] Isani 186.
[294] Isani 187.

Oates's orientation of the reader through the use of popular perceptions of the two professions, Dromoor's taking of the matter into his own hands seems all the more appropriate. The democratically chosen system has proven to be corrupt. It is therefore the duty of private citizens to react. Appropriately, action is taken in this case by a police officer. The portrayal of Dromoor corresponds to contemporary society's appreciation of its police officers. The possibility of an individual meting out his own moral vigilante justice remains disturbing nonetheless and though poetic in this case, cannot be transferably condoned outside the realm of fiction.

It is equally disturbing to compare the positions of informed reader and uninformed public. The reader of *Rape: A Love Story* is able to come to the conclusion that Dromoor's actions are in fact "just" because of his privileged access to information that tells him that there was in fact a gang rape and informs him who the rapists are. In real life, however, this would not be the case. The reader would be in the position of the judge, the jury and the general public, wondering at Teena Maguire's trustworthiness and quite possibly not wanting to believe that young men from the community could commit such heinous actions. Fictional worlds may have the power to create unambiguous environments, but in the real world ambiguity is pervasive. Throughout this discussion of justice, the line between objective understanding and emotional sense has constantly been blurred, preventing any satisfactory conclusion about whether or not justice was in fact achieved. Where the notion of justice remains elusive, however, the workings of "love" are slightly more tangible. In *Rape: A Love Story*, there can be no question that "love" has an influence on the final outcome of events.

1.4.3. The Question of Love

> What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.
> - Nietzsche[295]

The novella's title evokes a puzzling relationship. Linking the antithetical notions of "rape" and "love" is rather shocking, not to mention disturbing. This is not, however, the story of a victim raped by a so-called "loved one." Rather, it is the story of a rape and the effect it has on multiple forms of "loving" relationships amongst the protagonists such as the relationship between Dromoor, Teena and Bethie, and even, in a twisted form, the relationship between the rapists and their victims.

Dromoor's feelings of responsibility towards Teena and Bethie are linked to his conception of justice and his visceral response to Bethie's plea, as shown in the following two examples:

1) "*My mother is hurt! Please help her! I'm afraid my mother is dying please please help her!* / In that instant, Dromoor was pulled in. / As if their lives had gotten tangled with his, Christ knows why." (*RLS* 69)
2) "In fact Dromoor wasn't in love with Teena Maguire. / He didn't think so. It wasn't that. Not so simple. / Just some feeling he had about her, and the girl. The daughter. / Because he'd been the first on the scene. Maybe that was why. He was the one." (*RLS* 124-125)

Bethie's infatuation with Dromoor is linked to her conception of him as protector. He arrived first on the scene at the park and called for the ambulance that kept her mother from dying. He brought her mother home after a stint of mindless wandering and offered his assistance "any hour of the day or night" (*RLS* 85). Fatherless, living with an aging grandmother and a mother in a state of mental collapse, Bethie latches on to Dromoor in "yearning" and "desperation," thinking "*I love you. You are all to me*" (*RLS* 85). Later, when the rapists begin disappearing and Teena starts to recover, Bethie realizes that the "double-edged" love between protector

[295] Epigraph to Oates's first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*. My attention was drawn to this citation by Greg Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden," 3.

and victims is having its effect. In the short chapter "Double-Edged Knife" Bethie reflects back on the relationship:

> In time you would fall in love with other men. More appropriate men. Men your own age, or nearly. You would marry a man older than you by eleven years, when you were twenty-one. But you would never love any of these men the way in your desperation and yearning you had loved John Dromoor in your adolescence.
>
> Not until years afterward would you realize *I loved him for Momma's sake, too. Because she could not*.
>
> So it had been a double love. Dangerously sharp, like a double-edged knife. (*RLS* 104)

The title of the novella also obliquely reminds us that certain types of "love" are not enough to ensure protection and shelter from danger. Bethie realizes this about her grandmother who, in spite of the love she feels for her daughter and granddaughter, is no match for the rapists who are out on bail as she is "an aging woman not in the very best of health herself" (*RLS* 56). Similarly, Ray Casey's love for Teena is not strong enough to ride out the stormy experience: "He felt so guilty about Teena! Wanted to love her like he'd done but she wasn't the same person now. Never would be again. The hurt was deep inside her, it would never be healed" (*RLS* 96).

Yet the title also points to a twisted sort of "love" that might exist between the rapists and their victim. Looking out the window as the Pick brothers circle around the block and cruise several times past the house shouting provocatively, Bethie wonders about the men's motives:

> You wondered if in their sick way they loved Teena Maguire. They loved how they'd broken her, made her their own. In the courtroom you had entered trustingly, when the rapists' lawyer had uttered his terrible words like curses, you'd seen how avidly the rapists had watched your mother. The Pick brothers with their smoldering recessed eyes and part-opened mouths. (*RLS* 119-120)

Feelings of "love" are confused with the desire to control, the wish to possess the woman as if she were a valuable object. Indeed, the young men, especially the Pick brothers, have a lot at stake financially.

"For every victim there must be an aggressor," reminds Donald Dike in his article on aggressive victims in Oates's fiction, "but it is considerably less simple than that. [...] any complex character in this fiction is likely to be both, or from being one become the other."[296] Bethie becomes an accomplice to murder when she phones Dromoor and appeals to him for help, taking advantage of his emotional involvement in her family's situation: "*Help us please help us John Dromoor we are so afraid*" (*RLS* 120). However, though she may be legally responsible, can she be morally condemned? Chell's words of conclusion about *Mysteries of Winterthurn* are equally appropriate to this discussion of *Rape: A Love Story*:

> Obviously, the society Oates depicts is corrupt. While she steps forward to identify female victims within a society that victimizes nearly all of its members, she does not pretend to offer redemption. Her hero can become enlightened during his discovery of the patriarchy's crimes. He cannot find solutions. In fact, innocence lost means only that he, too, is corrupt.[297]

Indeed, Teena's and Bethie's responses to being attacked show that they are not entirely pure. The lack of appropriate solutions to their problems causes them to enter the cycle of violence themselves. In this way, they might be read as one of what Dike has called Oates's "aggressive victims" whose actions are governed by their states of incomprehension. Dike analyzes exertions of will on the part of Oates's characters as emanating directly as a response to states of bafflement:

> These exertions of the will – and others like them – are a response to large persisting questions, the legacy of our intellectual history, which, at her best, Joyce Oates is able to embody, as oblique questioning or questing, in the concrete fictional experience of her characters. The questions – about freedom versus necessity, design versus chance or sheer chaos, the power of love to save and the power of love to destroy – interlock, and all turn on, or are closely related to, the ambiguous idea of justice and on the possible relevance of this problematic idea.[298]

The moral status of Dromoor's actions is ambiguous. In an article discussing Ted Kennedy's unfortunate involvement in the incident at Chappaquiddick and his subsequent

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[296] Donald A. Dike, "The Aggressive Victim in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates," *Greyfriar: Siena Studies in Literature* 15 (1974): 23.
[297] Chell 23.
[298] Dike 28.

dedication to his public career, Oates concludes: "This paradox lies at the heart of so much of public life: individuals of dubious character and cruel deeds may redeem themselves in selfless actions. Fidelity to a personal code of morality would seem to fade in significance as the public sphere, like an enormous sun, blinds us to all else."[299] Indeed, this is the way the reader would like to interpret Dromoor, as a man who acts selflessly in the service of others. But can this redemption apply when the actions in the service of one person are at the same time cruel to another?

In *Rape: A Love Story*, the word "love" stands for something different in each of the relationships where it is said to exist. The feeling states the word refers to include adoration, moral obligation, control and possession. The slippage of the signifier throughout this story serves to enhance the feeling of cultural insecurity around the issue of rape and its repercussions. The issue of labeling is intimately linked to that of understanding and both issues prove problematic and illusory in the context of the novella. Can "love" serve as the justification for abandonment, terrorization or murder? In this case it certainly seems to. In each of the relationships qualified by the word "love," the "ethic of the emotions," to use Dike's expression, makes the lovers into aggressors who reserve the right to extra-legal revenge.[300]

Dike's term "aggressive victim" points to an aporia that has gradually been defining itself over the course of my discussion. If Oates's victims can become aggressors in their own right in reaction to the wrongs perpetrated against them, as is the case of the four works in this study as well as many others, then her fictional world is one that presents no possibility of escape from the tautological cycle of action and reaction, and the mystery of incomprehension and aggression is destined to repeat itself *ad infinitum*, especially as the "love" experienced by Oates's characters does not usually dissuade this behavior but rather encourages it.

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[299] Joyce Carol Oates, "Kennedy's redemption from the depths," *The Guardian* (Thursday, 27 August 2009).
[300] Dike 25.

Dromoor's systematic disposal of the aggressors, though it does not provide any response to Teena's anguished inquiries, does offer her a new chance at life. However, another way of reading the story questions whether or not Teena deserves the special attention and care Dromoor provides for her since she was unable and unwilling to properly care for her own daughter. As Creighton and Binette point out: "Echoing other tawdry and selfish mothers in Oates's world, Teena at the end of the novella leaves Bethie with her grandmother and elopes with a new husband: while this frees Bethie, it still leaves her to pick up the pieces of her life on her own."[301] On the other hand, calling Teena "tawdry" and focusing on the "selfish" aspects of her character might simply be another instance of blaming female victims.

The idea of the protagonist's worthiness is not the only ambiguity in the text. The novella also foregrounds a paradox in view of the introductory discussion of rape scripts involving a cultural preference for aggressors. Atkins discusses the theory that cultural rape scripts reinforce the notion of women as victims. "Rape scripts," she explains

> are defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists." Rape scripts are problematic because they serve to justify and/or deny male sexual aggression toward women through the perpetuation of false beliefs about rape. They suggest that rape is inevitable, that women like, desire, or deserve rape, and construct women as always already victims or victimized. The cultural rape script envisions the rapist as "legitimately violent and entitled to women's sexual services."[302]

As I have shown, it is precisely this type of belief that serves to defeat Teena Maguire both in the court of public opinion and in the court of justice. Blaming the woman victim is not a new phenomenon, as Cara Chell points out in her reading of *Mysteries of Winterthurn*: "Oates's unreliable narrator follows the pattern set by that century's society; for the most part, he

[301] Creighton and Binette 455.
[302] Atkins 433-434.

blames the victim for the crime."[303] In a particularly striking example from this novel a serial killer is acquitted of his crimes:

> The entire second story of "The Cruel Suitor" shows a society quick to blame the victim for the patriarchy's crimes. Even the narrator admits that during the trial of Valentine Westergaard, "the roles of *murderer* and *victim* were, by shrewd degrees, reversed." [...] After Xavier proves satisfactorily (to the narrator, the reader, and most of the town) that Valentine viciously seduced and sadistically murdered the young women, at the trial Westergaard himself manages to induce a "reasonable doubt" in the minds of the jurors by declaring he was haunted.[304]

Indeed, the reader gets the impression that had Dromoor not taken care of the rapists and Teena had gone through with the trial, a similar reversal would have occurred.

However, women who refuse to acknowledge they are potential victims can unintentionally invite abuse by putting themselves in vulnerable situations such as walking alone through deserted areas (behavior engaged in by both the protagonist of "Naked" and Teena of *Rape: A Love Story*). Yet no solution is offered for women who wish to find a way out of this vicious circle.

Rape: A Love Story complicates the situation because the Maguires fear both a renewal of violence and cultural rape scripts. They combat the one by appealing to Dromoor which effectively nullifies the other, allowing them to forget. This is by no means a solution, however, as society remains unchanged. Dromoor's character might be read as either deconstructing cultural rape scripts or complying with them. On the one hand, Dromoor does not accept the condemnation of Teena as a deserving victim and takes steps to bring her justice once the system shows signs of failing in this respect. On the other hand, Dromoor's protection of the two women reinforces the notion of their vulnerability and inability to act for themselves: they remain women living in a male-dominated society. Oates's novella does not promote one reading over the other. Thus, the text offers an experience of unreadability. "In the space between the promise and the perpetually deferred fulfillment of the promise the

[303] Chell 9.
[304] Chell 11.

story takes place," explains J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading*.[305] This means that the text evokes the possibility of meaning without confirming or denying any one meaning. Meaning, according to Hillis Miller's theory, rather than being contained within the text, comes from the process of reading, from the interaction between the text and the reader. The reader is therefore placed before an ethical imperative. Faced with the indecidability of the text, he must respond and take responsibility for his response. He may choose not to respond, but that in itself is a response.

Finally, the natural human desire to think there is a "point" behind actions and existence seems to be another way in which psychological violence is inflicted on lived experience. As Paul de Man remarks in *Blindness and Insight*, "The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing 'the nothingness of human matters.'"[306] The idea that the desire for meaning is universal is communicated by its frequent manifestation throughout the text. I have already discussed Teena's desire to find meaning, which is a source of spiritual anguish, and the jurors' desire for meaning, which leaves them vulnerable to manipulation. Chronologically, however, the first instance of the urge to find a reason comes from Bethie herself when, during the mermaid episode in the park, she is exasperated with her mother, insisting there must be some point to the invention of the mermaid. "But, Momma, there has got to be some *point*," she insists before suddenly becoming overwhelmed by an inexplicable feeling of anger directed at her mother (*RLS* 26). Walking through the park, Bethie notices the stone figure of a mermaid on the facade of a building and asks her mother what the point of it is. She is disturbed by the sight of this "ridiculous curving fish tail instead of legs," "a freaky deformed female" (*RLS* 25). Teena's response is unsatisfactory but telling as it reinforces the notions of male dominance and female victimization: "Momma said, 'What's the point of anything made up? Just something

[305] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 33.
[306] Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (London: Routledge, 1996) 18.

exotic for men to look at, I guess. Men make these things up'" (*RLS* 26). Bethie sees the mermaid as a grotesque, helpless creature and her mother's resignation to this fact provokes her anger, foreshadowing her own mutation into an aggressive victim later in the story.

Remembering back to her school days and reflecting on "the teasing, pummeling, pinching, punching, mauling, kicking, and verbal abuse that surrounded the relative sanctuary of the schoolhouse," Oates concludes: "I don't believe I was singled out, and I came to see years later that such abuse is generic, not personal. It must prevail through the species; it allows us insight into the experiences of others, a sense of what a more enduring panic, entrapment, suffering, and despair must be truly like. Sexual abuse seems to us the most repellent kind of abuse, and it's certainly the abuse that nourishes a palliative amnesia."[307] The questions raised in *Rape: A Love Story* are not answered. Instead, after confronting unanswerable questions, Teena, Bethie and Dromoor have done what all successful Oates characters do. They have processed and accepted their experiences and moved on. Dromoor is advancing in his career. Teena is in a relationship and enjoying life. However, even this interpretation is complicated by the final chapter which clearly indicates that Bethie continues to be haunted by her past, a point I will develop further in my second part.

[307] Joyce Carol Oates, "Writers: See How They Run," *The Writer* 113.8 (August 2000): 9.

These first four chapters have allowed me to show not only the thematic importance of multiple manifestations of the mysteries of life in *The Falls, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* but also, through parallels drawn with other writing by Joyce Carol Oates, the prominence of this preoccupation in her work. Of course, these mysteries are not the exclusive domain of Joyce Carol Oates's fiction. Indeed, Oates herself considers them to be the principal subject of all "serious fiction," which she describes as writing that "invariably deals with problems of a moral and intellectual nature, quite apart from matters of craft. It poses riddles, paradoxes, questions that cannot be readily answered; it would seem to educate us into the complexities of the world – a fictive world that contains our own."[308] It may be the case that all serious fiction deals with these basic problems of existence. Nevertheless, it does not all do so in the same way. In Oates's fiction, as we have seen, the riddles of existence are not simply evoked, they are expressly foregrounded by the author who has her characters voice them.

Posing these questions, however, does not mean that answers can be found. The artist figure in Oates's novel *Solstice* sees "the labyrinth as a state of mind, a permanent state of mind."[309] This idea, expressed by a character who is a visual artist, reinforces the relationship between artistic creation and literary creation which, according to Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre, are "the most mysterious or inexplainable, at least the most *human*, parts of existence."[310] As these first four chapters have shown, inherent mysteries pervade Oates's fiction at many levels. As Gavin Cologne-Brookes reminds us in his "Introduction: Humility, Audacity and the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," "while she is sadly resigned to the likelihood that the world has no ultimate meaning, it still 'has meanings, many individual and alarming

[308] Joyce Carol Oates, Preface, *Story: Fictions Past and Present*, Eds. Boyd Litzinger and Joyce Carol Oates (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1985) 832.
[309] Oates, *Solstice* 55.
[310] My translation of: "la création littéraire ou artistique – le plus mystérieux ou inexplicable, en tout cas le plus *humain*, de l'existence." Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre, *Que fait la critique?* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2008) 81.

and graspable meanings, and the adventure of human beings consists in seeking out these meanings.'"[311]

Oates prefaces a review of two works about Emily Dickinson by two lines from the poetess: "The Riddle we can guess / We speedily despise."[312] From the discussion thus far it is apparent that Oates has learned this lesson from Dickinson as solutions to the riddles posed in her fiction are not easily guessed at, if they exist at all. Indeed, solutions, it seems, are not at all the point. David Leon Higdon's comment about *Wonderland* that "because [it] is a novel and not a work of philosophy or sociology it should not be pressed for one answer"[313] seems appropriate for the corpus works as well. The four texts offer up the possibility of meaning without confirming it. In this way, to read them is to deconstruct the act of reading by encountering the limits of what the text can provide. In *The Ethics of Reading*, Hillis Miller describes this as the "ethical experience" of reading, which is the realization that the text can offer an experience but does not guarantee any one meaning. Furthermore, Hillis Miller explains that each act of reading is a unique event that cannot be reproduced: "It takes place as an event in a certain spot and turns that spot in a certain sense into a sacred place, that is, into a place which is inaugural. Reading [...] turns empty space into a locus where something unique and unforeseen has occurred, has entered into the human world, and where it will have such effects as it will have."[314] Oates's texts elicit questions but do not respond. It is the reader who must choose the meaning he will take away from the text. Given the degree of mystery these texts evoke, it is easy to see how the meanings they elicit might be endless. Thematic mysteries abound in the work of Joyce Carol Oates. It remains to be seen how these

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[311] Cologne-Brookes, "Humility, Audacity and the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates" 387. Cologne-Brookes' citation is taken from Oates's article "The Nature of Short Fiction; or, the Nature of My Short Fiction," Preface, *Handbook of Short Story Writing*, ed. Frank A. Dickinson and Sandra Smythe (Cincinatti: Writer's Digest, 1970) xi-xviii.
[312] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Woman in White," *The New York Review of Books* 55.14 (25 September 2008).
[313] Higdon 450.
[314] Hillis Miller, *Ethics of Reading* 53.

themes are carried through by Oates's use of textual devices and plot organization, the respective subjects of Parts II and III.

PART TWO
TRANSCRIBING THE ENIGMATIC

> Yet *meaning* in prose fiction, no less than in poetry, derives from language – voice, rhythm, interior music – the indefinable essence of a work. What do we mean by "voice"? – is it as mysterious in art as in life?
>
> - Joyce Carol Oates[315]

> Like gems turned slowly in the hand, diffracting light in new and startling patterns, all serious works of art yield a multiplicity of meanings.
>
> - Joyce Carol Oates (*PA* 2)

It is clear that the mysteriousness of life is granted a certain central prominence in the writing of Joyce Carol Oates. In my discussion of her fictional philosophy, I have outlined the primacy of the "gap" to Oates's conception of human existence in the consistent discrepancy between experience and the ability to intellectualize and comprehend it. In this next part, I examine another layer in the construction of meaning: other forms of gaps, this time concerning style and characterization. As Sartre has said, "One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way. Style is what gives prose its worth."[316]

Interestingly, the titles of the works studied here all allude to kinds of gaps. The title of *The Falls* denotes both the geographical gaps in terrain necessary for the formation of waterfalls as well as the metaphysical discrepancy between language and action. *Rape: A Love Story* associates two words that seem fundamentally opposed, creating a comprehension gap between reader and signifiers. This same sort of phenomenon occurs with *Beasts*, a word used to refer to human nature, and *The Tattooed Girl*, a phrase that refers to a character whose physical qualities distract from the nature of her humanity.

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[315] Oates, Preface, *Story: Fictions Past and Present* 830.

[316] My translation of: "On n'est pas écrivain pour avoir choisi de dire certaines choses mais pour avoir choisi de les dire d'une certaine façon. Et le style, bien sûr, fait la valeur de la prose." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948; Paris: Gallimard, Collection "Folio essais," 1996) 30.

As previously discussed, Bethie Maguire's comment in *Rape: A Love Story* about the nature of "events" and what "links" them foregrounds the question of knowledge and certain problems associated with the notion, notably the discrepancy between our understanding that a certain event occurred and our comprehension of why and how it happened. Two very broad themes associated with the idea of knowledge are explored in Oates's work: knowing what is meant through the use of a given signified, and knowing what is meant by the words and actions of other people; notions that are foregrounded through the use of different textual and structural strategies.

When asked about her personal view of her own aesthetics, Oates responds that she considers herself a formalist because she is interested in the forms and structures of fiction and language. We need forms to put our stories in, she says, adding "my work is always carefully calibrated."[317] She is very concerned with the length and symmetry of the sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters and parts that make up her works and she speaks of herself as being excited by forms in the same way as poets are excited by them. There is more to this than the simple challenge of finding words to fit into a certain rhyme and meter. What Oates is trying to emphasize is the importance of finding a form that will be best suited to the translation of her ideas onto paper.

In order to address the issue of our unfathomable states of mind, which at least in her literary world are home to numerous obsessions, Oates has developed a style (especially in her more recent works) that appropriately makes frequent use of repetition and poetic overlapping because, she says, that is the way our minds work. She has also said that "a novel with no repetitions would be a novel without memory, wouldn't seem psychologically plausible."[318] The concrete result is often a thread of characters' italicized thoughts running periodically through the text. Italics in Oates's works often stand for thoughts that come to us

[317] Kerri Miller, Interview with Joyce Carol Oates, *Talking Volumes*, Minnesota Public Radio (4 October 2004).
[318] Kerri Miller, *Talking Volumes* Interview with Joyce Carol Oates.

unbidden, from our deep subconscious. They are, in fact, the attempted manifestation in print of that which is ultimately unknowable, the uncontrollable mad obsessions of our psyches, or what William James describes as "the 'transitive parts,' of the stream of thought."[319] At times, these thoughts take the form of an obsessive sort of mantra as is the case in *Beasts* with the repetition of the phrase "*Go for the jugular!*" Such techniques find their place in Oates's project of evoking a psychological reality.

In a 2005 article entitled "An Eye for Detail: The Lessons of Balzac, Flaubert and O'Connor," Oates emphasizes and extends the argument put forward by Henry James in his "The Lesson of Balzac" that what makes Balzac's writing great, the reason he is "the master of us all,"[320] is his attention to detail. "The lesson of Balzac," writes Henry James, is in "the part assigned by him, in any pictures, to the *condition* of the creatures with whom he is concerned" and his attempt at creating an "art of complete representation."[321] If Balzac's characters are interesting to his readers, it is because the supposedly insignificant details he accumulates are in fact highly significant as they create an illusion of reality that makes his characters interesting as individuals, for "there is no such thing in the world as an adventure pure and simple," writes James, "there is only mine and yours, and his and hers."[322] In "An Eye for Detail," Oates resurrects James's argument to counter the notion that character description is a waste of time. She cites "two masters of European literature," Balzac and Flaubert, who each used detail as an important part of characterization, and "one master of the

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[319] W. James 2. James's complete explanation of his concepts of "substantive" and "transitive" states of mind is as follows: "When we take a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is the different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be an alteration of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest. / *Let us call the resting-places the 'substantive parts,' and the places of flight the 'transitive parts,' of the stream of thought*. It then appears that our thinking tends at all times towards some other substantive part than the one from which it has been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another."

[320] Henry James, "The Lesson of Balzac," *The Question of Our Speech; The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905) 115.

[321] H. James 103.

[322] H. James 106.

contemporary American short story," Flannery O'Connor, who "created stories in which every detail and nearly every word was charged with meaning."[323] Oates outlines a theory of the "background" and "foreground" of literature that recalls O'Connor's notion of a "realism of distances":

> I agree that the essential thing will always remain what people – in fiction or in life – actually do; but nearly as important for the writer is the environment in which they perform. A failure to understand the relationship between the "background" (overall rhythm or structure and theme) and the "foreground" (each sentence of each paragraph) of literature accounts for much unpublishable fiction.[324]

"In the midst of the vulgar, certain mysterious signs appear," writes Oates of O'Connor. Of fiction in general she maintains that "if your characters are wearing a certain kind of clothing – all this is of supreme importance."[325] Thus, Oates's "foreground" is similar to O'Connor's "surface." They are of prime importance because it is they that allow access to "an experience of mystery itself"[326] that lies beyond. The careful selection of detail is an important component of Oates's psychological realism. "There are in general two kinds of writers," she explains, "the first – and older – kind wants to report incidents as if they were real, things that have already happened. The second is not content with 'reporting' events but wants to evoke their psychological reality for the reader, through the use of sensuous details and symbols."[327]

Oates does indeed make use of a wide range of "sensuous details and symbols" in creating the various psychological realities that make up the "lives" of her many characters. However, creative use of vocabulary is not the only technique at Oates's disposal. Language, as we have seen, has its limits. "Language," Oates remarks in an essay on fictional elements of non-fiction writing, "by its very nature tends to distort experience."[328] Yet words are not

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[323] Joyce Carol Oates, "An Eye for Detail: The Lessons of Balzac, Flaubert and O'Connor," *The Writer* (2005): 38, 40. This is a reprint of an earlier essay which had been published under the title "Background and Foreground in Fiction," *The Writer* 80.8 (August 1967): 11-13.
[324] Oates, "Eye for Detail" 38.
[325] Oates, "Eye for Detail" 41.
[326] O'Connor, "Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 41.
[327] Oates, "Eye for Detail" 41.
[328] Oates, "On Fiction in Fact" 77.

the only means available through which the fiction writer can convey meaning. Other techniques include the absence of words (gaps, ellipses, dashes, etc.) and the organization of the text. Part I dealt with the limits of understanding at the thematic level and the way in which incomprehension drives the plots of Oates's novels. Part II will look more closely at how Oates's language and structural techniques contribute to reinforcing the thematic enigmaticity conveyed by the texts. Chapter 5 focuses on the use of textual devices that emphasize the insufficiencies of language. Chapter 6 discusses how Oates's deliberately jumbled narrative structures evoke the mysteries of interconnectivity. Finally, Chapter 7 explores the way in which the language depicts characters permanently trapped in liminal states, struggling with shifting identities. The opacity of Oates's "foreground" will gradually provide access to the disturbing psychological reality of her characters.

Chapter V
"Phrases of Silence": Textual Devices

> One can never come to the end of the exploration of the self by way of language. . . . Fascinating.
> - Joyce Carol Oates (*JJCO* 85)

In response to an interview question about whether she had ever felt so alienated from her environment that she had had to disassociate herself from it, Oates responded:

> There was always a certain doubleness. I liked people very much and wanted to be liked by them, I think. At the same time, there was a doubleness and a sense of criticism and a sense of wanting to be elsewhere to gain a perspective. A sense of personality that disassociates itself from the immediate, and is asking questions like, "Why am I here? Who is this person? What am I doing? What is the purpose of this? Is this folly?" These questions are sort of always going through my mind.
>
> I have a very philosophical imagination. I studied philosophy in college, so basic philosophical questions are always scrolling through my mind like, "Why am I doing this? What is the value of this? What is the purpose of this?" These questions are very hard to answer.[329]

As I have just discussed at length, the mysteries of existence – elusive origins, inconsistencies of experience, communication difficulties – are thematically foregrounded in all of Oates's plots. What stands out from the discussion concluded in Part I is a resounding "Why?" "Why?" is Teena's anguished cry when the memory of her rape returns. "Why did you cheat us of our grief?" Ariah's children plead with her. In short, the questions "Why do you do what you do?" and "Why is life like this?" tend to preoccupy her characters.[330] Oates's protagonists, we have seen, are defined by their interrogative spirits, their wondering natures. Indeed, the frequent use of the verb "wonder" and other aporetic expressions add to the feeling of mystery pervading these works wherein the characters are often presented as unsure and obsessive about lacking information; they not only wonder about others, but also about

[329] "Interview: Joyce Carol Oates," *Academy of Achievement* (20 May 1997).
[330] Samuel Chase Coale has remarked about *Missing Mom* (2005), pointing out that "the reader is left with a devastating 'why,' the word repeated one-hundred-and-twenty-two times." "Psychic Visions and Quantum Physics: Oates's Big Bang and The Limits of Language," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006): 438.

themselves and their own motivations. Leaving these sorts of questions unclarified and unanswered has been an important quality in Oates's oeuvre since *By the North Gate*, says Greg Johnson, who sees it as part of the important theme of the "inefficacy of language"[331] that pervades her work. However, in addition to the inability of narratives to establish meaning, the texts also raise the question of the insufficiency of language to do so. After skimming through newspaper articles reporting Ariah's vigil at The Falls, Dirk reflects on the uncanniness of the experience: "How strange it seemed to Dirk, the myriad actions and impressions of the long vigil reduced to such simple statements." (*TF* 88)

The enigmaticity that Oates's characters struggle with as a seemingly permanent aspect of their lives has four main sources – metaphysical questions about the meaning of life, opacity of communication with others, obscurity of one's own unconscious impulses, and lack of knowledge about facts behind events – all of which intertwine and affect each other in various ways and to varying degrees. The opacity of communication, whether it be with another person or with oneself, has various causes. It can be intentional, due to one party keeping thoughts to himself or deliberately attempting to mislead, or unintentional when a character has problems expressing his thoughts or when uncontrollable unconscious impulses are at play. Oates's texts convey this opacity in various ways, through the use of italics, repetition and punctuation marks such as dashes and points of suspension. This chapter will look at the wide range of language insufficiencies present in the corpus texts, including the possibility of formulating questions, but not answers and the discrepancy between memory, signifier and signified. The inability to express certain feelings and experiences through words leads to the use of various types of visual representation that indicate the spaces where meaning lies though it remains inaccessible.[332]

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[331] Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden" 9.

[332] Claire Chaplier also discusses narrative techniques in her dissertation on cruelty in some of Oates's short stories. Various techniques involving alternation, distortion and gaps turn the narrative structure into a "realm of

2.5.1. The Disorienting Catalyst

Samuel Chase Coale has identified a recurrent pattern in Oates's recent fiction which he terms the "Big Bang."[333] This is "a shock of recognition" that propels the characters' subsequent actions, the "crisis" or "epiphany" that occurs simultaneously with receipt of a particularly terrifying piece of news or the making of a nightmarish discovery. For Coale, in *The Falls*, this "Big Bang" is the Reverend Gilbert Erskine's leap into Niagara Falls, "thereby setting up the struggles and narrative trajectory of his widow for the rest of the novel." In *The Tattooed Girl*, it is Joshua Seigl's sudden bloodless realization "that he can no longer live alone." These momentous occurrences affect all aspects of the characters' lives: "From here the characters rush and flee as if caught in a fever dream, trying to re-group, comprehend, process the horror, and act accordingly. If individual selves were more or less intact before this blood-drenched iconic encounter, they certainly are not afterwards."[334] Coale does not discuss *Rape: A Love Story* or *Beasts*, perhaps due to the nature of the backward-looking narration. However, the violent rape of Teena Maguire at the beginning of the former certainly fits his description. In the case of *Beasts*, the site of the familiar totem in the Louvre unquestionably spins Gillian into a brief crisis, but this only prompts reflection upon her past; there is no indication in the novella that her future will be in any way transformed. Nevertheless, Gillian's consternation at the sight of the familiar object is the catalyst for the resurgence of past memories that in themselves constitute the majority of the story. In a way, this occasion, too, is a "Big Bang" propelling the action forwards in that it takes Gillian back

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mystery." "La Cruauté dans les nouvelles de Joyce Carol Oates," Doctoral Dissertation (Université Paris 7 – Denis Diderot, January 2001) 185.

[333] Coale explains that he chose the expression "Big Bang" because of his belief "that physics supplies the metanarrative of our contemporary era," especially the "seductive elusiveness" of quantum theory. Coale suggests "that quantum theory permeates our contemporary times and speaks directly to how much of modern fiction is created or at least appears to parallel and reflect that theory, and how Oates's probings of the self and consciousness, of language and trauma, seem to do the same." For Coale, quantum theory "is one more incarnation of a virtually invisible world, literally the realm of all religions and metaphysics," "a dizzying and dazzling sub-atomic world of interchangeable forces" in which "everything is in constant flux and turmoil, transforming, emitting, decaying, annihilating" (430).

[334] Coale 427.

to a period of her past and demands that the connection between past and present be filled in and explained.[335]

For Coale, Oates's pattern is closely linked to the mysteries of self explored in the first part of this study: "Oates's characters would agree that the individual self, or at least their subjective awareness of it (their self-consciousness), recognizes that strange, unfathomable, and often repulsive otherness that festers at the mysterious center of selfhood."[336] Certainly this would be true if Oates's characters were able to conceptualize their existential distress in such eloquent terms. The statement is perhaps more appropriately applicable to the author herself than to her characters. In any case, the notions raised by Coale's statement have already been discussed at length. That Oates considers life to be mysterious and that her characters also see it so has been established. What remains to be explored is the effect these unfathomable elements have on the language that must be used to express them. As Coale points out, "these coruscating epiphanies viscerally affect the language Oates's characters employ to describe what has happened to them."[337]

Thus, the "Big Bang" shocks that so greatly affect the characters' lives also affect the characters' abilities to effectively use language, transforming the way the narrative is transcribed onto the page. The result is the choppy, chronologically jumbled organization of much of Oates's recent work which Coale describes as her "well-known breathless rush of words, her eruption of impressions, fears, and insights that suggests a kind of stream of unconsciousness – a flight from some crime or gothic secret."[338] Coale cites the work of James Berger who, in his exploration of linguistic responses to terror, has remarked upon the

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[335] Indeed, Gillian's narrative corresponds to Coale's explanation that "several of these novels, in fact, are told in the first person by victims of the trauma themselves who breathlessly rush headlong to confess, describe, explain, and try to fathom what has happened to them, as if in controlling their story they can momentarily master their anger and resentment." (428)
[336] Coale 428.
[337] Coale 428.
[338] Coale 428.

insufficient, broken nature of language when faced with the task of communicating traumatic experience.[339] As an example, Coale points to the opening passage of *The Falls*:

> At the time unknown, unnamed, the individual who was to throw himself into the Horseshoe Falls appeared to the gatekeeper of the Goat Island Suspension Bridge at approximately 6:15 A.M. He would be the first pedestrian of the day. *Could I tell, right away? Not exactly. But looking back, yes I should have known. Might've saved him if I had*. (*TF* 3)

Insisting on the prevalence of aporetic expressions ("unknown," "unnamed," "approximately," "not exactly," "might've"), Coale observes that "already, language is scrambling to make sense out of what has occurred." Furthermore, this passage "makes clear that the only way to fathom Erskine's suicide, to tell oneself, '*I should have known*,' is by '*looking back*.'"[340] Coale's statement echoes the author's own feelings about the ability of language to account for the immediacy of present experience. In response to a question about whether there had ever been a day when she felt like giving up, Oates answered: "I've felt like giving up many times. It's hard to talk about now, because one cannot convey the depth of the emotion. When one talks about something retrospectively, it seems to be under control, but during the experience, there was no sense of control."[341]

Thus Oates's style, "in its drive to express the inexpressible," to use Coale's expression,[342] employs a certain number of textual strategies that attempt to transcribe inexpressibility onto the printed page. In other words, "she uses every possibility of language to map [the "Big Bang"'s] consequences in consciousness and in the world beyond it."[343] Using language to express the inexpressible, the realm of emotions and raw experience that exists outside language in a great, dark, silent void, is an enterprise perhaps inherently doomed to failure. Oates would most likely respond that it must in any case be attempted

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[339] James Berger, "Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns Against Language," *PMLA* 120.2 (2005): 341-361.
[340] Coale 429.
[341] *Academy of Achievement*, "Interview: Joyce Carol Oates" (20 May 1997).
[342] Coale, 435.
[343] Coale 438.

because it is in exactly this realm that the answers to all of the previously discussed philosophical questions lie. In addition to the aporetic language and continuous questioning, largely alluded to in Part I, this chapter will explore the author's use of various other "phrases of silence," represented in the text by italics, repetition, and gaps and dashes which indicate the communication of thought through erasure. These are non-negligible elements of her fiction, especially since she is so adamant about considering herself a "formalist" who chooses her language "very carefully."[344]

The expression "phrases of silence" is used by Oates in the final pages of *The Falls*. It is offered as part of a characterization of Bud Stonecrop, Juliet's taciturn friend: "The shaved-headed young man communicated as much in phrases of silence as of speech." The paragraph continues on to describe in more detail the types of silent communication used by Bud:

> In mumbled asides, grimaces, shrugs, grunts. He signed, he scratched his stubbled head. He was forever tugging at the ragged collar of a T-shirt, as if his baggy clothes were too tight. His smiles were cast sidelong, with the air of one uncertain that a smile from him was welcome. There was eloquence in Stonecrop if you knew how to read him. There was subtlety in his soul however clumsy; [*sic*] tongue-tied, and menacing he appeared to others. (*TF* 451)

Through a parallel mechanism, Oates's texts also communicate through various types of silences, both at the manifest and latent levels. On the one hand, italics communicate the intimate, private thoughts of characters that would remain inaccessible in a real life situation. Sometimes these are thoughts the characters consciously decide to keep silent; other times they represent ideas they do not consciously express. On the other hand, the text leaves certain things unsaid, forcing the reader to create his own meaning through inference. Occasionally the unsaid is represented by dashes or ellipses; elsewhere there are simply gaps in the chronology of the story. Finally, I will discuss Oates's use of repetition. One might object that repetition is the exact opposite of silence. However, I will attempt to show that the

[344] Oates has mentioned this upon multiple occasions. One of them is the 1997 interview posted on the Academy of Achievement's web site.

repetitions fill the space of notions that cannot be otherwise expressed, they therefore mask different instances of silence.

Oates has suggested that some gaps are due to the demands of form, as in her following comments about the novella: "the novella requires a sleight-of-hand technique, to suggest more than one is going to spell out clearly."[345] However, as suggested above, the unsaid also has an important role in the corpus novels. In the following sections, I will take a look at the textual "asides, grimaces, shrugs, grunts" employed by Oates. The techniques discussed in this chapter are present in each of the corpus works; however, I have chosen here to discuss each technique in relation to one specific work that will serve as an example. *The Falls* will provide the background for the discussion of the use of italics. Repetitions will be examined as they occur in *Beasts*. Finally, the unspoken, or unspeakable, will be explored in relation to *The Tattooed Girl*.

2.5.2. Italics and Inner Thoughts

In the following passage from her journal, Oates evokes the meaning of dreams and the nature of the relationship they have with the conscious self:

> One lives an entire life, no doubt, uneasily wondering at the relationship between the "dreaming" self and the "conscious" self. For surely there is a profoundly intimate relationship . . . yet at the same time such peculiar elements are introduced, such extrapersonal things. . . . A mystery that refuses to resolve itself, even with the passage of time. (*JJCO* 300)

In the first chapter of his seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud announces he will "demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique, every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific

[345] Greg Johnson, "Fictions of the New Millenium: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 45.2 (Spring 2006): 390.

place in the psychic activities of the waking state."[346] Oates's journal entry, however, clearly denounces Freud's humanist belief that the secrets of the unconscious mind are graspable and can be unlocked through the analysis of dreams. On the contrary, though there is surely a relationship between the dreaming self and the conscious self, its precise nature remains a mystery even though a century has gone by since Freud's initial publication of his dream theory.

Words matter. In a 2005 interview in London, Joyce Carol Oates discussed a recent novel whose title was changed for the British market: "So 'missing mom' gets translated into *Mother, Missing*, but *Mother, Missing* is a very different title. So, over here in England and in the U.K. it will seem like a very different novel."[347] Just as different words in a title can alter the perspective from which one sees a work, the way in which the actual words are rendered on the page can have a similar effect. Discussing the typographical representation of the opening sequence of Oates's *Black Water*, Nathalie Arnaud-Vincent puts forward that "it is certainly the brutal and spectacular format of the typographical isolation of the passage that generates a veritable visual shock which is the cause of the first rhetorical shock of this text, insofar as it is true, as Henri Suhamy suggests, that it is in the material layout, in the configuration on the page, that the first "figure" of style can be found, the first important key to a text."[348] Arnaud-Vincent is referring to the first chapter of Oates's novella. It is only one page long, a single eight-line paragraph. The first line is all in capitals; the last line is all in italics:

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[346] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Trans. A. A. Brill (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997) 5.

[347] Susana Araújo, "Joyce Carol Oates Reread: Overview and Interview with the Author," *Critical Survey* 18.3 (2006): 102.

[348] My translation of: "C'est sans doute de cette mise en page pour le moins brutale et spectaculaire, de cet isolement typographique générateur d'un véritable choc visuel que naît le premier choc rhétorique de ce texte, tant il est vrai, comme le suggère Henri Suhamy, que c'est dans la présentation matérielle, dans la configuration sur la page que réside la première "figure" de style, la première clé signifiante d'un texte." Nathalie Arnaud-Vincent, "Aux Frontières du correct: le choc rhétorique de l'incipit de *Black Water* (Joyce Carol Oates)," *Bulletin de la Société de stylistique anglaise* 23 (2002): 29.

> THE RENTED TOYOTA, DRIVEN WITH SUCH IMPATIENT exuberance by The Senator, was speeding along the unpaved unnamed road, taking the turns in giddy skidding slides, and then, with no warning, somehow the car had gone off the road and had overturned in black rushing water, listing to its passenger's side, rapidly sinking.
> *Am I going to die? – like this?*[349]

The role of the typography, Arnaud-Vincent suggests, in communicating the shock and horror of the situation is as important as the content of the passage itself. Certainly typography has an important role in our appreciation of a text. As Henri Suhamy explains, "figures appeal to our sensibility; they occur in discourse like illustrations, as if the text were creating ornamental motifs or representative images for itself. One is tempted to say that the most striking figure of style is constituted by the typographical manipulations that can be seen on posters, or on pages of poetry."[350] Thus, choosing to italicize a word, for example, grants it a different import. As in the above passage from *Black Water*, Oates has frequent recourse to the use of italics in her recent fiction. Leafing through the pages of *The Falls* reveals that rarely do more than two or three pages go by without the flow of the text being broken by an italicized passage. It does not take long to realize that these passages are interruptions surging up into the text from another dimension. Might they be the place in the text where the "dreaming" self and the "conscious" self, mentioned by Oates in the opening quotation, sometimes meet? As such, do they provide or obscure access to meaning?

The first chapter, "The Gatekeeper's Testimony: 12 June 1950," four pages long, is cut into by six such passages:

> 1) "*Could I tell, right away? Not exactly. But looking back, yes I should have known. Might've saved him if I had*." (*TF* 3)
> 2) "*No socks! With fancy shoes like that. A giveaway*." (*TF* 4)
> 3) "*Under the spell of The Falls. Nobody mortal was going to stop him*."

[349] Joyce Carol Oates, *Black Water* (New York: Dutton, 1992) 3.
[350] My translation of: "Une figure fait donc appel à la sensibilité; dans le discours elle survient comme une illustration, comme si le texte lui-même fabriquait des motifs ornementaux ou des images représentatives. On est tenté de dire que la forme la plus frappante de figure de style est constituée par les manipulations typographiques qu'on voit sur les affiches, ou sur des pages de poésie." Henri Suhamy, *Les figures de style*, 10th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004) 7.

4) "*Like we're sick of ourselves. Mankind. This is the way out, only a few have the vision*." (*TF* 5)
5) "*You wear out. You see too much. Every breath hurts*."
6) "*Not the first of the poor bastards I've seen, but God help me he will be the last*." (*TF* 6)

This chapter reporting the gatekeeper's testimony is not narrated in the first person as one might expect. Instead, it is told through the voice of a third person semi-omniscient narrator, recounting the gatekeeper's actions from his first sight of Gilbert Erskine (the unknown individual) until he returns to his booth to phone emergency services after witnessing the suicide jump. The italicized sentences listed above periodically interrupt the narrative. Though they are directly related to the subject of the chapter, they are also incongruous because they evidently originate from a different chronological period as well as a different point-of-view. In this case, all six passages can be plausibly understood as the gatekeeper's direct speech, looking back on the events with the privilege of hindsight. Thus, the narrative time of the chapter, 6:15 A.M. to 6:26 A.M. of 12 June 1950, is interspersed by testimony from a later period which represents the gatekeeper being interviewed by police, perhaps, or recounting the experience to friends and family.

Coale perceptively points out that it is the ability to look back and reflect on the experience that makes the gatekeeper's understanding of the events complete. At the time of the events, the man was simply reacting, not thinking: "He should have dialed his emergency number, back in the toll-booth. Now it was too late to turn back" (*TF* 4). Indeed, had the gatekeeper actually been conscious of having the thought about the socks at the chronological point where the second italicized sentence occurs in the text, he could have dialed the emergency number. Therefore, the gatekeeper integrated much more than he was able to conceptualize at the time of the onward rush of events. Thinking, and putting these thoughts into language, does not come until a later time. In these examples, then, the italicized sentences represent reactions that originally remained silent, unconscious, not taking form

until the gatekeeper mentally processes the events at a later time. We might say, then, that Oates's italics allow a certain degree of access to the liminal realm between the night-side and the day-side of personality. The following discussion will show that they are used to communicate various different kinds of thought. However, these thoughts almost always have an emotionally-charged significance and are frequently part of a visceral uncontrollable reaction on the part of the character to whom they are attributed.

The second section of the novel, the first pages of the second chapter, "The Bride," provides examples of other sorts of italicized sentences. This is the chapter in which Ariah wakes to find Gilbert missing, thinks back on her wedding of the previous day and the circumstances of her engagement, and finds Gilbert's farewell note. The first six pages of this chapter include the following examples:

> 1) "*Yes. I would. Foolish woman of course I would. Who are you, to be spared My justice?*" (*TF* 8)
> 2) "*Gone. He's gone. Can't be gone. Where?*" (*TF* 9)
> 3) "*Had Gilbert heard?*"
> 4) "*Don't. Don't think of it. No one can force you.*" (*TF* 10)
> 5) "Thinking *Mother! What does that make Gilbert and me, brother and sister?*"
> 6) "*If you've never drunk anything stronger than sweet cider, Ariah, do you think it's wise to have a second glass of champagne – so soon after the first?*" (*TF* 11)
> 7) "*Dear God, don't let my stockings be baggy at the ankles. Nowhere it can show*." (*TF* 12)

These are different types of sentences with different purposes than those discussed above in relation to the gatekeeper. Example 3 appears to simply be the standard use of italics as emphasis, conveying the panic and shame Ariah feels at the thought that her new husband might have heard her snoring. Examples 5, 6 and 7 convey thoughts whose origins are not ambiguous, belonging to the realm of Ariah's conscious thoughts. Each is conveniently signposted, providing an indication to the reader about how to understand them. 5 is preceded by the word "thinking," 6 is clarified by the phrase "a female voice chiding in her ear" (*TF* 11), and 7 is an example of something "she'd prayed silently" (*TF* 12). However, the remaining examples are not quite so straightforward. The first is in reply to Ariah's anguished

plea “God, help me! You wouldn’t be so cruel – would you?” She has just realized she has become a widow after less than one day of marriage: “How swift the reply came! A taunt that echoed so distinctly in Ariah’s skull, she halfway believed these pitying strangers could here it” (*TF* 8). Is God actually speaking to Ariah in the reply? Is she consciously providing the pessimistic response? Or is it an unconscious deep-rooted reaction to her emotional anguish? The intended origin of example 2 is similarly difficult to establish. Directly following the sentence that ends “Ariah had to know something was wrong, she’d been jolted from her hot stuporous sleep to this knowledge” (*TF* 9), it is unclear whether these are waking thoughts, dream thoughts, or are words meant to communicate the emotion of a lingering feeling. Example 4 is similar in many ways to 2, conveying either conscious thoughts or a recalcitrant state of mind. Thus, in many instances, the text itself proves as enigmatic as the themes with which it deals.

The play between the “voiced” and the “unvoiced” is present both at the levels of plot and text and is responsible for the creation of a subtext, a mysterious space between the lines in which meaning somewhere lies. The reader is privy in some degree to both the public and private worlds of the characters, the former through the standard narration and the latter through the use of italics representing the characters’ inner thoughts. Italicized phrases represent ideas that cross through the characters’ minds but that they, for one reason or another, do not choose to express out loud. They may do this knowingly or unknowingly. They may choose to keep an opinion or reaction silent. They may be reminded of things that have been said previously. In other instances, italics represent unvoiced thoughts emanating from the unconscious that the characters may or may not be consciously aware of having. As this brief introductory discussion shows, these italicized inner expressions serve various purposes. The following analysis will set aside, for the most part, instances of italics used to communicate emphasis or clearly conscious thoughts to focus on the more ambiguous

occurrences that occupy the liminal realms of self/other relations and conscious actions/unconscious impulses.

The most straightforward use of italics, which accounts for a large number of them, is to give the reader privileged access to a character's "private thoughts." By this, I mean that they represent ideas that, at the narrative level, the characters wish to keep to themselves, often because if expressed they might be considered as inappropriate and could lead to an awkward confrontation, but that allow the reader a more thorough understanding of the characters' mental processes. The third person semi-omniscient point of view frequently employed by Oates, which Arnaud-Vincent has called a "seeing with" (*vision avec*),[351] lends itself quite naturally to such revelations. Royall's reaction to his mother in the following passage is an example: "'Life outside the family is a masquerade,' Ariah said flatly. 'You kids will learn.' / *But not inside the family?* Royall shifted his shoulders uncomfortably" (*TF* 321). Chandler's reaction to seeing Royall's gun is another: "Chandler thought, chilled *My brother holding death in his hand*" (*TF* 389). Indeed, private thoughts of this type are attributed to all of the main characters. A final example concerns Juliet's reaction to being taken to visit Bud Stonecrop's invalid father:

> She guessed that he must love his father very much; she was reminded of her own father, whom she hadn't known but of whom she thought almost constantly. *He could be alive now. After that accident. He could be alive like this, a living death*. (*TF* 460)

Such private thoughts tend to be signposted and so are easily identifiable as such. Their interest lies in the fact that they allow the characters a more developed voice and make them seem more life-like. The narrator does not simply describe the characters' inner worlds, their

[351] Arnaud-Vincent's "seeing with" is a sympathetic inside view. She explains what she means by this term: this view is "communicated by a narrative voice very close to the character that causes the reader to repeatedly become a voyeur [...]. This "inside vision" reaches a very clear peak in the numerous shocking passages in which is it very clearly the interior monologue of the heroine that is responsable for the narrative progression." My translation of: "élaborée par une voix narrative très fortement complice qui amène le lecteur, de manière répétée, à se faire voyeur […] Cette "vision avec" culmine très nettement dans les passages, nombreux et fulgurants, où c'est très clairement le monologue intérieur de l'héroïne qui assure la progression du texte." Arnaud-Vincent, 27.

inner voices are actually directly transcribed. This technique adds another layer to the authenticity brought to the text by the inclusion of dialogue. The opacity of the self/other communicative process is explicitly illustrated.

A more indeterminate type of private thought is directed toward oneself. During the crisis intervention episode, Chandler reflects on the nature of his volunteer work: "So it went. Chandler had several times arrived too late, the drama was over, everyone was headed home. / That sinking sensation in the gut. *You haven't made any difference, what a fool you are. What vanity*" (*TF* 355). As the episode wears on and everyone begins to get "edgy, anxious," Chandler has more thoughts of this sort: "Chandler was concerned that his head would begin to ache. That was his weakness, or one of them – throbbing pain behind his eyes and a rising sense of dismay, despair. *Why did he die. My father. Why, like a trapped rat. I loved him! I miss him*" (*TF* 358-359). Later, once the episode is over, Chandler reflects on his relationship with Melinda and her baby daughter Danya as he drives to their apartment: "Almost, when he held Danya, he could feel the infant taking in information, hungry to absorb all of the world. / *She could be mine. She could love me as a father. I am not required to justify my life*" (*TF* 373). A similar example is this two-line italicized section appearing just prior to the account of Chandler's impulsive drive "to l'Isle Grand to visit his father's sisters whom he had not seen in more than sixteen years": *"The dead have no one to speak for them except the living. / I am Dirk Burnaby's son, and I am living"* (*TF* 378). In these instances, it is unclear whether these are meant to be direct, conscious thoughts or whether they are the author transcribing the character's feelings into words similar to the way in which we render the Chinese language, for example, using the Western alphabet.

Other italicized interventions seem to communicate "unacknowledged unconscious responses" on the part of the characters such as during Royall's unplanned visit to the cemetery: "Royall wasn't one to ask himself *Why the hell have I stopped here?*" (*TF* 282).

These are the occasions in which it actually seems that the author is communicating information that has erupted from the depths of her characters' unconscious realms. We understand when we read this that although Royall was not one to ask himself such a question, deep down at some more profound level of existence, he must have been wondering. Likewise, Royall's reflection about his mindless tourism job: "Royall liked his job at the Devil's Hole, work that kept him busy and didn't require much thought. *It hurts too much to think. There's no future in it*" (*TF* 292). These thoughts are, in fact, residue of suppressed emotion; thoughts that exist on some level, but that Royall will not acknowledge on the surface layer of his personality. Again, during Chandler's crisis intervention episode, instances of unconscious realizations accompany his conscious decision-making. "How charged with significance this scene had come to be, in the intensity of the drama, that had no significance otherwise. *The small life. The inevitable life. The life that awaits*" (*TF* 370). Soon after, he decides to make a bold move towards resolving the situation: "He understood that he was doing the right thing. *In the purity of his heart, he could not fail to do the right thing*" (*TF* 371). Is Chandler's unconscious speaking in these moments? What about when Melinda is angry with him for putting his life on the line and these two sentences interrupt the narrative: "*Going outside the family. Betraying. / Bullshit*" (*TF* 374)? A related use of italics, but one that conveys thoughts which are perhaps not quite so deeply buried, is for interventions which seem to indicate a "voice of conscious": "*Careful now* Royall was being warned. *You want to be careful, son*. This voice, crafty yet kind, he sometimes heard when he might be drifting into a mistake" (*TF* 282).

More often, however, italicized passages represent "memories" of things other characters are actually supposed to have said out loud as in this passage when Royall remembers words said by his mother:

> Years ago he'd overheard Ariah maneuvering Chandler out of going to the University of Pennsylvania, where he had a scholarship, in favor of staying

> closer to home, attending Buffalo State. *You know how strain upsets you. What if something terrible happened to you. So far from home.* (*TF* 323)

As in the gatekeeper's excerpt, discussed above, these intrusions create a diachronic tension and though they represent the words of another person, they surge up in the characters' present in much the same way that unconscious thoughts do. When a character thinks about a past conversation, it is also represented in italics in the text, such as this conversation between Royall and Candace after "Candace discovered she wasn't pregnant after all":

> *But do you still love me? Royall? Even if –*
> *Honey, of course. I love you more than ever.*
> *You're sure? Because if –*
> *I'm sure.*
> *We will have babies, though. Won't we?*
> *Just as many as you want, Candace. I promise.* (*TF* 297)

Once again the italicized characters in this passage indicate both a chronological gap and a relationship of continuity between past and present. Finally, two other uses consist of rendering "imagined other voices," when one character imagines the response of another character – "Yet Royall imagined her teeth grinding, *Yes I am furious. Yes you have gone too far this time*" (*TF* 317) – and "interpretation of body language" – "Royall saw Candace and Annie exchange a glance. *My future mother-in-law. Oh, God!*" (*TF* 303).

This technique of typographically rendering certain passages in italics to set them apart, indicating their difference from the narrative in which they are embedded, allows the reader access to two levels of meaning in relation to the characters: both the exterior and interior realms. As Burwell writes about a similar technique in *Do With Me What You Will*, "italicized sections permit individuals to reflect upon, to amplify, or to force rhetorical analysis of what the detached narrator reveals about them."[352] The effect created by this technique is of a disjointed narrative struggling to render a multi-layered fictional reality. Italicized interruptions indicate rupture while at the same time pointing to continuity,

[352] Burwell, "The Process of Individuation" 94.

betraying the instability of the present while offering a glimpse of the complex space/time relationships that make up lived experience. The differences in font (normal, to italics, back to normal, etc.) indicate to the reader the passage between different types of information with different psychological ramifications, the coexistence of objective and subjective realms. In some cases, they foreground the discrepancy between appearance and actual psychological experience. In others, they simply add another layer of meaning by "showing" a character's memories rather than "telling" them by integrating them more smoothly into the narration. This technique of "showing" an inner mental thought as a textual "image" creates a sort of "internal polyphony," allowing the reader access to the realm of unvoiced thoughts which in real life usually remain silent, the unconscious dimension of the characters. In so doing, it foregrounds the fact that in real life, so much actually remains hidden, unknowable to each individual.

Though there can be no doubt that Oates's fiction presents a style that is uniquely her own, her innovative use of forms such as italics seems to identify her as a literary descendent of Modernist writers such as Dos Passos and Faulkner, "master craftsmen, who invented or developed new forms like the complex interior monologue, the shifts of time and space, associations of ideas and images, or the deconstruction of the narrative text, to completely transform the art of fiction."[353] These authors, like Oates, were driven to an experimental use of form in their desire to transcribe the enigmatic experience of life. For example, the fragmented nature of her texts recalls the innovative structure of Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy which presented "a new novelistic architecture based on fragmentation, contrast, juxtaposition and 'montage,'"[354] inserting stream-of-consciousness "Camera Eye" passages throughout the text, used by the author to "register sense impressions and struggle toward meaningful

[353] Hélène Christol and Sylvie Mathé, *An Introduction to American Fiction* (Paris: Ellipses, 2000) 75.
[354] Christol and Mathé 79.

speech."[355] Likewise, her use of inside views calls to mind the interior monologue and stream of consciousness technique of Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* which presents the inner thoughts of its characters in successive fractured sections.

2.5.3. Repetition

Related to the problem of effectively communicating the notion of private thoughts and unconscious impulses is that of successfully conveying depth of emotion, emotion that Joyce Carol Oates's characters may not be able to adequately express in words but that is nonetheless felt. The use of adjectives and adverbs is not always enough to properly transmit the intensity of emotion. Oates uses repetition in her texts to convey the passion of her characters and invest certain passages with a lyrical quality that sweeps the reader along with the tide.[356] "*I can't fail, I must succeed.* This mantra ran through my head like a deranged Muzak. *Can't fail. Must succeed. Can't. Must. Who? How?*"[357] The "I" in this passage is none other than Oates herself in a non-fiction piece recalling her days as a graduate student. However, the attribution of the quality of being assailed by a mantra running through one's head "like a deranged Muzak" is one that she also employs in her fiction. Both Ariah of *The Falls*, especially in Part I, and Gillian of *Beasts* are afflicted with this obsessive malady.

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[355] Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 346.

[356] This section does not concern itself with all stylistic forms of repetition as outlined, for example, by Henri Suhamy in *Les Figures de Style*. Rather it focuses on the repetition of a word or an expression throughout an entire text or a section of text that takes on the quality of a refrain, becoming a motto or "connecting thread" (*fil conducteur*) for the text. The effect is one of insistence, of trying to force meaning on linguistic signifiers through sheer use of them, the idea that if something is said enough, it either becomes true (in a performative sort of way) or eventually reveals the truth it has hitherto been masking. Suhamy reminds us of the quality the use of repetition has to blur the distinction between signifiers and signifieds: "Grammatical organization is by nature the enemy of waste and redundancy. However, with repetition the distribution of roles between signified and signifiers is slightly blurred. Signifieds are mixed with signifiers and these suddenly take on the movement of things they were meant only to represent according to an abstract and arbitrary code" (53). My translation of: "L'organisation grammaticale est par nature ennemie du gaspillage et de la redondance. Or, du fait des répétitions, la distribution des rôles entre signifiés et signifiants se brouille un peu. Les signifiés viennent se mêler aux signifiants, qui adoptent soudain le mouvement des choses qu'ils étaient censés ne représenter que dans une codification abstraite et arbitraire."

[357] Joyce Carol Oates, "Nighthawk: A Memoir of a Lost Time," *Yale Review* 89.2 (April 2001): 60.

Samuel Chase Coale describes the "wave of feeling" created by Oates's use of repetition in Part 1 of *The Falls*:

> Repetition both tames and extends the original experience and event; it observes similar particles of language in order to interrupt the breaking wave of shock and dismay. Yet in its frantic repetition, the wave of feeling is reborn and thrust forward: we are plunged into the falls of human passions and compulsions, with barely one's head above water, consciously aware of the very real danger of drowning in a torrent of language.[358]

"Run for your life" is the refrain of the chapter "The Fossil-Seeker" (*TF* 26-39). Variations on this phrase are repeated at least seven times in the space of the chapter, conveying Gilbert's panic and despair at having married a woman, thus betraying his friend Douglas. Coale writes that Oates's language in this chapter "pursues Erskine to his death with its obsessive repetition," repetition which "chants a death sentence."[359] However, in Oates's spirit of the characters taking on lives of their own, I would say that her language accompanies his death wish rather than causes it, transcribing what this specific personality in this situation must be feeling rather than rushing up behind to push him off the cliff.[360] Later, "yes" is used like a rhythmic beat throughout the chapter "7 July 1950" (*TF* 110-111) when Ariah accepts Dirk's marriage proposal, "they were married" begins many of the short paragraphs in the eponymous chapter (*TF* 115-139) recounting the early days of their marriage, and variations on "It was only logical, wasn't it?" become a refrain for the first section of the chapter "The Little Family" (*TF* 163-165) in which, to refer to Coale's very poetic description, "language attempts to net the experience and plumb its intensities as word-particles rush forward, creating wave-sentences of passion and submission" with the effect of "hammering home the

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[358] Coale 437.
[359] Coale 437.
[360] Oates's attitude towards the fictional characters and worlds she creates is not without its ambiguities. She often insists upon the fact that her characters seem to take on lives of their own, insisting almost upon writing their own stories. However, during a February 2010 apperance in Philadelphia, when asked whether she had ever considered returning to the world of her National Book Award winning novel *them* to write about what has become of her characters thirty years later, she responded with an adamant "no," saying that is not something she would be allowed to do because *them* is a fiction, it is not real. Reading, Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (15 February 2010).

reality of what Ariah has done."[361] In each of these cases, the syncopated rhythm created by the repetition allows the reader access to a certain dimension of the character's emotional realm and a more powerful understanding of the sheer panic, passion, awe or doubt they struggle with.

Repetition is equally important to the structure of *Beasts*; Gillian's narrative is driven by the two incessant refrains "go for the jugular" and "we are beasts and this is our consolation." Whereas the meaning behind the repetitious phrases in *The Falls* is fairly clear, the repetition serving to create an emotional buildup, in *Beasts* there is the added difficulty of the ambiguous nature of the words. Is "go for the jugular" meant literally or metaphorically? What does the "this" refer to in "we are beasts and this is our consolation"?

"Go for the jugular," or a variation of it, is repeated eight times, always in italics. The phrase first appears as the closing line to chapter 2 "The Alarm: 20 January 1976" (*B* 7). At this point its insurgence seems completely random. It may have something to do with journal writing which Gillian talks about doing just prior to its appearance, or perhaps to what she was writing about. It is upon its second occurrence that we discover the origin of Gillian's refrain to be words expressed by Mr. Harrow as instructions to poetry seminar students: "'The blood-jet is poetry.' *Go for the jugular*'" (*B* 58). Mr. Harrow's words form a mysterious expression that seems to relate to something about communicating meaning through one's writing, but Gillian does not quite comprehend and struggles to understand. Subsequent occurrences see the alternate phrasing "*excavate your soul*" (*B* 67, 78) associated with them. Still Gillian does not understand. Mr. Harrow's words and behavior are opaque to her. She does not relate to men the way he thinks; she does not think of her boyfriends as "lovers" as he suggests (*B* 61). Furthermore, she struggles with not being able to live up to his expectations for her writing:

[361] Coale 437.

> *Don't be fearful: excavate your soul.*
> *Go deeper!*
> *You can't go deeper? Go deeper.*
> *Go for the jugular.*
> But I could not. Alone of Mr. Harrow's students, I could not seem to follow his instructions. (*B* 67)

This is the opening of chapter 12 "'Anatomical Specimens': November 1975" in which Gillian gives more precise information about the nature of Mr. Harrow's desires for their writing:

> He wanted "no lies, no subterfuge, no 'nice-girl' bullshit." We were to record our dreams, our fantasies, our hopes, our visions; our personal relationships with parents, siblings, friends, lovers; we were to examine our emotional, physical, sexual lives as if we were "anatomical specimens." If we wanted to be writers we must examine the world with fresh, skeptical eyes. (*B* 67-68)

"Go for the jugular," then, means accessing the night-side of one's personality. This is a potentially dangerous act, Oates's text seems to indicate, resulting as it does in the eventual literalization of the metaphor.[362] It is around this point in Oates's text that the implication of "go for the jugular" starts to shift. From a metaphor about accessing one's truest emotional self, it shifts to a metaphor used as a call to real-life action before ultimately being literalized in an act of murderous revenge. Chapter 13 "The Late Birth: November 1975" recounts Gillian's continuing obsession with pleasing Mr. Harrow and her deepening depression at not being able to do so. For her journal exercise, she reflects on her parents and the fact of her birth: "*I am a late birth. Born when my mother was forty-one. When my father was in his early fifties. My birth was a 'miracle' – no one had expected it. Miracles are unnatural*" (*B* 80). This chapter refers literally to the fact that Gillian's parents were already middle-aged when she was born. However, it also refers metaphorically to the length of time it has taken her to give in to her inner urges. Reading this chapter, we witness Gillian using her professor's words as a mantra. "Go for the jugular" thus becomes a call to action used by

[362] The "go for the jugular" metaphor is literalized in *Beasts* when Gillian enacts her murderous revenge, thereby allowing her inner and exterior worlds to mix. Brian McHale discusses literalization of metaphor as a "collapse of world-boundaries [that] is violent, disruptive [and] catastrophic." *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) 80.

Gillian to motivate herself to be able to confront Andre Harrow. The chapter begins with the italicized words: "*You can't go deeper? Go deeper. Go for the jugular.*" It then continues with relatively mundane narration: "I remember the chapel bell tolling." The bell also contributes to the call to action. In the middle of the following paragraph, more italicized words burst in: "*Fire. Fire. The jugular. Go for it!*" (*B* 77). On the following page we learn that Mr. Harrow has completely usurped the place of her parents in Gillian's imagination: "As Andre Harrow, so conspicuously withdrawing from me, loomed larger and larger. / *Don't be fearful: excavate your soul.* / How obsession begins, takes root like a virulent weed . . ." (*B* 78). And finally, as she is working on her journal writing, "*Go deeper. Deeper"* appears in the middle of a paragraph (*B* 79). The following chapter, "14. The Surrender: November 1975" is the one in which Gillian finally surrenders herself to Mr. Harrow. Once this occurs, the repetition of "go for the jugular" ceases until it is used as justification of or explanation for the fire set in the Harrows's residence, which chronologically happens much later, but is textually introduced before.

The second refrain, "we are beasts and this is our consolation," appears less frequently in the text, but carries added importance due to its lexical link to the title, giving some indication of its thematic relation to the work as a whole.[363] Indeed, from the epigraph to the opening pages, we are confronted with multiple examples of unnatural, perhaps even grotesque, humanity. Both paratextual elements and the text itself instill the work with the unstable state of human beings and the cloudy frontier between human and animal domains. The "allograph" epigraph[364] chosen by Oates to open *Beasts* is five lines from D. H. Lawrence's poem "Medlars and Sorb-Apples" taken from the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. The function of the epigraph retains its enigmatic nature, although Oates seems to be

[363] *Beasts* is a thematic title as outlined by Gérard Genette in his discussion of paratextual elements in *Seuils* (82-83, 93).
[364] An allograph epigraph is a citation, an epigraph attributed to an author who is not the author of the text. Genette, *Seuils* 154.

setting up an intertextual relationship between her novella and Lawrence's poetry through the similarity of the titles. The five lines of the epigraph evoke the gods, an exaggeration of human characteristics, and the idea of taking pleasure in pain, a marginal human tendency. They seem to be both a commentary on the title, fleshing it out, and on the text, an indication of how the author (*épigrapheur*, the one responsible for placing the citation in this position) sees the content of the story and the reader (*épigraphaire*, the one intended to read the text) will react to the reading experience.[365] Then, on the first page of the actual text, the inaugural image is that of the emasculating totem in the Louvre: "It was approximately ten feet high, a primitive, angular wooden figure, seemingly female, with a long, narrow brute face, blank eyes, and a slash for a mouth." The object is identifiably human-like, yet none of its traits are exactly right so that "it seemed only minimally human" (*B* 1). The second chapter, too, begins with a disturbing image of deformation in the first indications of Gillian's physical appearance: missing hair, "close-cropped" hair, burning hair (*B* 5).

As with "go for the jugular," the phrase "we are beasts and this is our consolation" seems to retain some hidden meaning which is all the more frustrating to the reader as Oates has foregrounded its importance to such an extent. Marisa interprets Dorcas' words and art to mean "we're all animals and that's our strength" (*B* 24). This reformulation is apparently offered as an explanation, however, it remains an equally enigmatic statement, in my opinion. Ostensibly, it indicates that "we should take comfort in the knowledge that we are simply animals and do not need to attempt to rise above this status," to paraphrase in a much less concise form. But is this true? Whether or not to give in to one's animalistic impulses is a major theme of the novella. Gillian ultimately does; however, she also suffers the consequences.

[365] Genette distinguishes between three roles pertaining to epigraphs: *épigraphé* (the author of the citation), *épigrapheur* and *épigraphaire* (*Seuils,* 153-154).

"We are beasts and this is our consolation" appears upon only three occasions in the text. It is an expression chosen by Dorcas to accompany her sculpture exhibit, thus setting up an appropriate symmetry: Andre Harrow is the origin of "go for the jugular," Dorcas the origin of "we are beasts." In this capacity, "these provocative words," as they are called, appear set apart in the text on their own line and all in capital letters (*B* 13). The expression is twice rendered in italics. The first occurrence is in the very first chapter when Gillian stumbles unexpectedly upon the sight of the familiar totem in the Louvre:

> As if the nursing mother had called to me . . . *Gillian? Don't be afraid. We are beasts, this is our consolation.* For here was nightmare. Here was obscenity. I imagined how, staring at such a thing, a man might feel sexual desire wither and shrink within him: the yearning, hungry male reduced here to an ugly head, pressed so tight against the mother, it must surely smother. A woman would feel all softness within her, the tenderness that makes us human, vanish.
> *We are beasts, we feel no guilt.*
> *Never guilt*. (*B* 2)

This passage would seem to indicate that Gillian is not completely convinced at the inherent bestiality of humans. However, the tale that follows does indeed give some credence to the claim. Interestingly, in this instance the phrase is associated with the admonition not to be afraid, pointing to the idea that there is an inherently fearful aspect of humanity associated with our deepest natures. The final appearance of these words is no less enigmatic:

> *They'd been drugged. Like me.*
> *They'd been in love. Like me.*
> *They would keep these secrets forever. Like me.*
> *We are beasts and this is our consolation*. (*B* 119)

Thus begins chapter 21 "The New Year: January 1976," the chapter following the one in which Gillian discovers the Harrows' betrayal and the "use" to which they have put her and others. Again, we wonder what the consolation is exactly? If it has to do with the acceptance of inherent bestiality, why must secrets be kept? At this point, though it is not specifically stated, a plan for revenge, though still relatively formless, seems to be already taking shape in

Gillian's mind.[366] Is the consolation, then, that her desire for a bestial revenge is legitimized by Dorcas' theory? The questions remain unanswered.

Reading an Oates passage can often be quite a physical experience. The reader feels the emotion bursting forth from deep down, such as when an italicized expression surges up in the middle of a paragraph. When mad obsessions break to the surface, oftentimes as the result of a communication barrier, this can lead to violence, a persistent theme in our culture which Oates confronts. Indeed, Gillian is challenged by communication difficulties on all sides. Her relationship with her parents is dysfunctional, she cannot completely trust her friends and she is unable to communicate with her professor. Thus, "the short insistent refrains"[367] that communicate the confused nature of Gillian's enigmatic interior monologue effectively involve the reader in the mysterious frightening realm of one who is constantly, yet ineffectually, grasping at meaning.

2.5.4. Dashes and Ellipses

As Oates's characters struggle to create meaning out of their experiences they often find themselves either lacking in knowledge or struggling to find the appropriate words to express themselves or both. In *The Falls*, the frequent use of the verb "wonder," particularly in situations narrated from Chandler's point of view, adds to the feeling of mystery, presenting the characters as unsure and hesitant, but also highlighting the opacity of their relationship to the world as in these two examples:

> 1) "Chandler wondered, not for the first time in such circumstances, how it can happen that a man finds himself in such a place, one day. A rat backed into a corner. No way out." (*TF* 358)

[366] At the close of the preceding chapter, immediately following her discovery, we read: "If a plan was taking shape in my mind, as a dream begins to form itself, by day, out of the residue of the day, to burst into splendor by night, I had no awareness of it" (*B* 117).
[367] My translation of: "les petits refrains obsédants." Expression used by Arnaud-Vincent in her discussion of *Black Water* (27).

> 2) "She has wondered if, at the instant of his death, as his car skidded into the guard railing, smashed through and plunged into the river, her father, Dirk Burnaby, had experienced a vision. / And what that vision might be. / She has wondered *Is Death itself a vision*? [*sic*]" (*TF* 429)

In *Beasts*, Gillian's uncertainty faced with the ambiguity that seems constantly to surround her is expressed by a high degree of aporetic expressions. For example,

> 1) "Someone, it might have been Cassie, squeezed my hand so hard I winced in pain." (*B* 7)
> 2) "I might have smiled more, I suppose. I might have smeared lipstick on my mouth." (*B* 47)

Another strategy Oates uses to communicate the hesitancy of her characters is the use of symbols such as ellipses[368] and dashes to indicate confused pauses in speech or sentence break-offs due to inadequate word availability. Though these symbols occasionally appear within the narrative, the use of ellipses and dashes to communicate the notion of inexpressed meaning is used most frequently in dialogue or other transcriptions of direct speech or thought such as certain italicized passages discussed above.[369] Oates has on multiple occasions talked about her characters taking on a life of their own and controlling, in some ways, the way the text is written. One of these is a 2005 interview with Susana Araújo: "I feel that my charaters are alive in some way. And that they are not just characters in a story. And that they have a livingness and a psychology that overlaps the formal constraints of the fiction. So the characters can still keep on living."[370] The fact that dashes and suspension points occur most

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[368] The discussion here pertains not to ellipsis in the sense of a figure of speech that involves the omission of words, rather to ellipsis as the punctuation symbol consisting of three points of suspension which serves, as we shall see, as a textual indicator of the boundary between language and the nonlinguistic. For James Berger, language is a "middle realm" between material sources and the nonlinguistic which is "never fully itself, always in creative and agonized relation with what it is not" (354-355). It is this "agonized relation" between language and the nonlinguistic that struggles to find expression in Oates's text, but can only be represented through the use of symbols.

[369] Dialogue or direct speech is not always set apart in Oates's writing by quotation marks. Speaking about a short story entitled "Good To Know You" from the collection *Will You Always Love Me? and Other Stories* which recounts a conversation between two couples in a Chinese restaurant, Oates calls this way of rendering conversation without quotation marks an "American vernacular style." Reading, Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (15 February 2010). This style, to which she has frequent recourse, has the effect of further blurring the different ontological domains associated with a text, making it sometimes difficult to distinguish what thoughts to attribute to characters, narrator and author.

[370] Araújo, "Joyce Carol Oates Reread," 96.

frequently in dialogue and representations of the characters' thoughts seems to point to their frequent inability to express themselves.

However, Oates's use of these symbols is inconsistent. Similar to her use of italics, upon close scrutiny it becomes apparent that one cannot trust the symbol itself as indicative of meaning because throughout the works they are used for so many different functions. The reader is always forced to interpret them according to the context in which they are used. In this way the reader is put in a parallel position to that of the characters, over and over again wondering What? and Why?

In general, Oates tends to use dashes to indicate hesitancy on the part of her characters and ellipses to indicate that words are being omitted from the text or that there is a conversation gap because a character cannot find the right words to formulate a thought. The following passage from *The Tattooed Girl* offers an example of each:

> *Myself again. But more than myself, a new man.*
> "Oh. Mr. S-Seigl . . ."
> When Alma Busch saw her eccentric employer with his whiskers shaved away, his face naked and exposed, bleeding from a half-dozen small scratches, and his heavy cheeks, jowls, and chin red-smarting and swollen, she stood staring at him astonished. What a sweet comical simpleton the girl was, Seigl laughed in delight.
> "Alma. I see now I should have warned you, dear. *This* is what the illustrious 'Dr. Seigl' looks like."
> Alma stammered, "But – Mr. Seigl – your face is b-bleeding –" (*TTG* 165)

This passage occurs the day Seigl's disease goes into remission and he excitedly but inexpertly shaves off his beard. It provides an example of the nuance between the uses to which the two types of symbol are put. The ellipses in the second line indicate Alma's confused astonishment at seeing her employer thus transformed and her inability to formulate an appropriate reply whereas the dashes at the end of the passage signify the choppy rhythm of her speech, communicating her hesitancy at the appropriateness of broaching the subject of Seigl's bleeding face. However, as the two forms are quite closely related, rather than treat them separately, I will discuss them together as roughly equivalent in their functions.

Coming upon ellipses and dashes, it is not always eminently clear what they are supposed to indicate. It is generally easy to recognize when they are used for the standard functions of indicating that one speaker cuts another one off, or when dashes are used to set apart information in the middle of a sentence. However, when Seigl's response to Dmitri's question "Cigarettes, sir?" is represented as "Why, yes . . ." (*TTG* 34) it is not at all clear precisely what these dots are meant to represent: Surprise at being addressed unexpectedly by the waiter? Hesitancy at how to respond? Trailing off of the word? Perhaps all three. Or maybe none of the above. Another unclear formulation occurs when Seigl falls in the cemetery:

> He tried to lift himself, and could not.
> "God damn . . ."
> Shameful to be lying in a public place, exposed to strangers' eyes, helpless as a broken-backed snake! (*TTG* 47)

Here, do the dots indicate he says these words in a soft, resigned way rather than the expected forceful delivery of the explicative that would be indicated by an exclamation point or at least a period? Or disbelief, confusion? A combination of the above. One might argue this insistence on such small elements of the text to be a trivial matter. However, I would maintain that for an author who repeatedly insists on the importance of form to her fiction and claims to spend countless hours revising her work, even the punctuation should not be taken lightly. In January 1982, in the midst of working on a short story, Oates wrote the following entry in her journal about the process of communicating through the words she chooses to construct her fiction:

> . . . The riddle of fiction. All's surface, skill, design, "tone." These are the elements the writer concerns himself with, becomes obsessed with. Paragraphs. Sentences. Words. But beyond the page, beyond the story itself, <u>what is trying to speak</u>? [...] Yet I'm fascinated with the ways in which they sneak up on me; the blocks of language; the voices. And this fascination carries over into a deep interest in others' language – Bellow, et al. Become attuned to the rhythms, the cadences, the commas, the brevity or length or simplicity or complexity of the sentences, and you are attuned to the buried self, the <u>real</u> soul. (*JJCO* 452)

Thus, we must understand that Oates's use of these symbols is always meant to communicate something even though that "something" may not be entirely obvious, or may exist only as a feeling, beyond the realm of language, for it is possible, as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* suggests, that "ultimately what cannot be said is of more value than what can be said."[371]

Oates uses ellipses to foreground the fact that as readers we have access to only limited portions of the characters' "lives." The following line begins Part 1, Chapter 5, immediately after Seigl has first been introduced to Alma in The Café: ". . . *friend Alma. New to Carmel Heights* . . ." (*TTG* 43) Here, Seigl is remembering Dmitri's words, words that had been running through his head in a dream, but this is the only element of the dream communicated to the reader. Likewise, due to the limited omniscient point of view employed by Oates that tends to only present one character's viewpoint at a time, if a character is not conscious of something going on, the reader will often not receive any information about it. These cuts in and out of consciousness are communicated by ellipses as in this example:

> "You've heard of Primo Levi, Alma?"
> Alma worked her mouth staring toward a corner of the dining room table. She'd polished it the day before, she liked how it shone. What was this guy saying? Who?
> ". . . in Auschwitz he never thought of suicide in two years. While always before, he had. And, after . . ."
> Alma shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. Felt like her bra straps were cutting into her flesh. Why the fuck was Seigl telling her this? (*TTG* 161)[372]

We understand here that not all of Seigl's mini-lecture on Levi is reported, only those words Alma is actually conscious of hearing. In the following passage, ellipses indicate that the conversation between Alma and Seigl continues "off the page" so to speak:

> "I'll be needing you to assist me more hours of the day, starting next Monday. And so it might be more convenient for you to move into the guest room . . ."

[371] Berger 344.

[372] Oates's allusion to Primo Levi, the Italian writer and thinker who survived Auschwitz, is interesting in the context of this study. Oates, like Levi, explores the problem of how to find meaning and value after exposure to inhumanity and cruelty, identifying the roots of evil inside humanity and not in any supernatural dimension. However, Joseph Farrell explains that in Levi's humanist thinking, "the dilemma over why humanity behaves as it does in a Godless universe" is ultimately resolvable. Introduction, *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004) 17. This is where Oates's thinking diverges from Levi's as her fiction tends to show that the search for meaning is all there is.

Of course, Alma's salary would be raised. (*TTG* 145)

In the fictional world, Seigl's words to Alma are evidently meant to continue as he explains that he will, of course, raise her salary. However, his exact words are not represented, the fact that this point is discussed is told simply as part of the narrative.

Oates means to present her characters as "people" that exist beyond the pages of her fiction. In the same way that they can have "off the page" conversations, they are also meant to perform actions that are not explicitly described by the narrator as in this instance of Seigl instructing Alma on how to turn the heat up and down: "'Alma? If the room is too cold, or too warm, here's how the thermostat works . . .'" (*TTG* 147). Here, the ellipses indicate the space of Seigl's demonstration. He must be touching the thermostat, manipulating its buttons or nobs in some way that Alma is meant to be observing, but this is neither specified, nor described in detail. Thus, Oates's use of ellipses in this manner foregrounds the artificiality of text and its inherent inability to account for the whole of lived experience.

By far the most common use of ellipses and dashes, however, is to communicate hesitancy on the part of the characters in a diverse array of situations. They might emphasize uncertainty at the veracity of the words being spoken, such as the surprise expressed by Seigl's acquaintances at the beginning of the novel – "*Joshua Seigl? Hiring an assistant? To live in his house . . . ?*" (*TTG* 5) – or Seigl's own astonishment at suddenly feeling well again, "'Can it be? My God . . .'" (*TTG* 163). They occasionally represent a pause in speech rhythm as the speaker vacillates between possible interpretations: "He wanted to know: where'd she come from? / Her eyes blinked slowly. Just now? Or – then?" (*TTG* 29). They can also reveal the limits of language in situations of incomprehension or confusion, such as when Dmitri fails to understand Seigl – "'Pascal . . . ?'" (*TTG* 40) –, when Alma dozes off and loses touch with reality – "Dmitri woke Alma with a rough shake of her shoulder. She groaned, confused. 'Don't h-hit me . . .'" (*TTG* 40-41) – or when a request from Dmitri catches Alma off guard,

"'A gun? Like . . .'" (*TTG* 185). Similarly, they might enhance a feeling of uncertainty on a speaker's part about the subject being discussed: "'But – were there witches? I don't understand'"(*TTG* 79); "In her husky smoker's voice Jet was saying, marveling, 'But – you look very well Joshua. You drove to the airport – by yourself?'" (*TTG* 114). At times they suggest faltering due to a character's unwillingness to divulge certain information: "The eyes went vague, evasive. 'Different places . . .'" (*TTG* 77); "'Anything to t-tell you' – that's an unusually aggressive way of initiating a conversation even for you, Jet, isn't it?' / There. Seigl had managed to speak coolly, though under duress" (*TTG* 106); "'I – don't know.' / Guiltily Seigl thought: my illness" (*TTG* 107). They can even transmit tentativeness about the accuracy of a memory: "Hadn't one of Jet's lovers, years ago, been so desperate to escape her he'd fled to – was it Tangier?" (*TTG* 111).

Among the uses of ellipses and dashes to express the idea of hesitancy, the most frequent instances are those which imply an inability to formulate an idea in words or a lack of self-assurance on the part of the speaker. In the first case, these are moments when characters cannot produce the word or expression they are looking for – "'Thank you . . .' / Seigl glanced up smiling and grateful but vague-eyed: he wasn't remembering Dmitri's name" (*TTG* 34); "Seigl said, 'Dmitri, here. I'd better pay now before . . .' Before he forgot, was probably what Seigl meant to say" (*TTG* 37) – or have difficulty deciding on the proper word to express an idea: "He protested, 'I can go for days without . . .' / Stumbling, falling. Mis-stepping" (*TTG* 69); "'Who else! Who else but your sister! Your sister you have banished from your life out of – guilt? Shame?'" (*TTG* 105); "More times than Seigl could recall, Jet had been deeply – tragically? – in love" (*TTG* 111). Almost as frequently, dashes and ellipses signal uneasiness due to a lack of self-assurance that results in hesitation as when Alma addresses Seigl in the book store, saying "'You're a . . . doctor, I guess?'" (*TTG* 76), or when she stammers her apology upon arriving late for her first day of work: "'Mr. Seigl! Oh gosh

I'm sorry I'm late . . .,'" and later, "'I . . . I wasn't sure . . . I'm always afraid of going into the wrong house, see?'" (*TTG* 87).

Though such examples are scattered throughout *The Tattooed Girl*, there are several long passages that stand out as being particularly marked by them. Part 1, Chapter 8 (*TTG* 57-65) relates the beginnings of Alma and Dmitri's relationship. It is told from Dmitri's point of view, the narrative interspersed with italicized passages representing dialogue from Alma's half of various conversations with Dmitri as remembered by him. Of seventeen such memory intrusions, twelve contain at least one set of ellipses, the cumulative effect of which reinforces all the more Alma's helplessness, confusion, uncertainty and lack of self-esteem. Another passage, Part 2, Chapter 11, presented from Seigl's point of view, relates his phone conversation with his friend Sondra Blumenthal once his disease has gone into remission (*TTG* 167-170). Seigl comes across in this passage as in the throes of a manic episode over which he has little or no control. He is needy and excited, failing to identify himself over the phone, "talking rapidly" and "laughing louder than he intended" which soon leaves him "breathless" (*TTG* 168). There is an uncharacteristic gleam to his eye and he is not entirely in touch with reality:

> A halo of light shimmered in his eyes. Where was he? Sprawled in a chair before a tall radiant window. During this conversation he would lose his awareness of the person to whom he was speaking though if required to identify her he would have immediately responded: Sondra Blumenthal. (*TTG* 169)

Unable to control himself, he interrupts his friend and is astonished to hear himself asking for her help in planning his birthday party, for the idea of wanting to have a party "was a revelation to him" (*TTG* 169), impetuous behavior that shocks him and leaves him wondering why he had not previously realized he desired such a thing. Throughout this passage, Seigl's speech and thoughts are punctuated by dashes indicating the irregular rhythm of his speech and his inability to precisely formulate his thoughts: "'Where have I been? I've been –

nowhere. I mean, here. But I've been *no one* here. You know," Seigl said, laughing louder than he intended [...]" (*TTG* 168). In more exaggerated states of confusion, his speech trails off into bewildered silence represented by suspension points: "'I realize I've been remiss, dear, and I'm sorry. I've had a – complicated time. But now it's past . . .'" (*TTG* 169). This passage is followed by the above-quoted passage indicating his momentary loss of awareness. Seigl and Alma's conversations in Part 3 about Jews, the Holocaust, witches and Alma's life, also tend to be punctuated by these markers of hesitancy and confusion, visually reinforcing the difficulty they have in communicating and understanding each other. For example, Seigl's query about the mark on Alma's cheek: "Seigl spoke gently, kindly. 'I've wondered – is it a birthmark? Or . . .' His voice trailed off in embarrassment. And he'd meant only well" (*TTG* 242). Likewise, Alma's hesitation when the two discuss whether the Holocaust really happened: "Alma laughed uncertainly. 'Some people – I heard – they don't think – whatever it was – happened'" (*TTG* 246).

Thus, through the use of italics, repetition, ellipses and dashes, Oates reinforces the thematic mysteries evoked by her texts by transmitting them also through visible markers on the page. Although each technique has been discussed separately, largely in regard to a certain work of fiction, it is evident that they often work together. Part 3, Chapter 14 of *The Tattooed Girl*, one of the several ideological confrontations between Alma and Seigl, provides a good example of this.. Narrated from Alma's point of view, her sense of Seigl as master of both his language and his emotions in contrast to her general state of bumbling confusion is shown through an accumulation of various devices. The narration describes her performing a variety of gestures that convey hesitancy and confusion including "staring and seeing nothing," "biting at her thumbnail" (*TTG* 256), shrugging, frowning, head shaking and "hugging her rib cage" (*TTG* 258). The dashes and ellipses that punctuate the dialogue convey the tentativeness of the two characters with regard to each other. Seigl does not understand Alma, but prods for

answers. Alma, though reassured by his teacherly tone and methodical way of speaking, is confused by and wary of a situation she cannot understand. She had expected to be fired after mouthing off to Seigl several days before. As this has not transpired, she has lost her bearings. The repetition of "wanting to say" and her wondering to herself about whether or not Seigl's politeness is "real" (*TTG* 256) reinforce the idea that she is stuck, like a broken record, in a state of confusion. Likewise, the repetition of "Not a Jew!" (*TTG* 259) several pages later, new information that roars in her ears, leaving her dazed, serves to reinforce, once again, the notion of her confusion and her unwillingness to make changes to her preconceived notions. Deep down, Alma considers Seigl to be an inveterate liar. The thought/memory "*You made it all up. It's all lies*" (*TTG* 257) is a reference to their conversation about Seigl's novel and Alma's difficulty in understanding the concept of fiction based on reality. For her, writing must either relate historical facts or be made up, so she accuses Seigl of having invented his Holocaust story. She continues this logic at the end of the passage. By writing about the Holocaust and knowingly having a Jewish patronym, Seigl, according to Alma's logic, is letting people think he is a Jew, playing at being Jewish. He knows that he has qualities that others consider to be Jewish, but does nothing to outrightly refute this, such as change his name. Thus, according to Alma's logic, he is a liar and still worthy of her hatred. Alma's confusion and inability to "read" her employer are no less abated by their conversation. She has simply manipulated the new information to make it fit her old pattern of understanding. Such intellectual turmoil is exhausting, leaving her to sink "into a deep stuporous sleep from which she wanted never to wake" (*TTG* 260). Surrendering to the night-side would be one solution, perhaps, though it would bring neither Alma nor Seigl any closer to the "truth."

The techniques discussed in this chapter have the cumulative effect of lending a very oral quality to Oates's fiction, as if the characters are speaking directly, using the author only as a medium to transcribe their experiences. Nancy Blake has refered to such techniques as a

"breaking apart" of language and observed that "one of the main reasons for the mutilation of language patterns" in contemporary fiction "has been the desire to leave spaces, interstices in the smooth surface of words in order to incorporate speech into their tissue."[373] After all, "man's most fundamental experience is that of the rupture, the gap between the word and the reality"[374] and it is natural that this should be reflected in fiction. Thus, the fragmented, oral nature of Oates's storytelling, broken up by so many gaps, raises the question of whether or not her work might be considered as blank fiction. Roland Barthes, in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, describes blank fiction (*écriture blanche*) as exhibiting a "non-style," an "oral style," a "spoken quality of writing" (*degré parlé de l'écriture*).[375] It is a fiction characterized, he writes, by "a style of absence that is almost an ideal absence of style; thus writing is reduced to a kind of negative mode in which the social and mythical nature of language is reduced to a state of neutral and apathetic form."[376]

However, as Dominique Viart points out, the simple presence in a work of fragmentation, blank spaces on the page, and original style is not enough to justify qualifying a work as blank fiction. In a neutral style drained of pathos and emotional stylistic signs, blank fiction depicts the banal and ordinary aspects of life in a world where meaning is lost and disconnectedness abounds.[377] These are most certainly not qualities of Oates's fiction. On the contrary, Oates's elliptical use of punctuation, together with the insistence of italics and repetition contributes to portraying a fictional world where meaning is not lost but rather latent and multiple, each character's experience is individual and unique and the establishment of meaningful connections, though rare, is possible. Though Oates's fiction can

[373] Nancy Blake, "Mutilation and Rebirth in Contemporary Fiction," *Trema* 2 (1977) 11.
[374] Blake 17.
[375] Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972) 64.
[376] My translation of: "un style de l'absence qui est presque une absence idéale du style; l'écriture se réduit alors à une sorte de mode négatif dans lequel les caractères sociaux ou mythiques d'un langage s'abolissent au profit d'un état neutre et inerte de la forme." Barthes, *Degré zéro* 56.
[377] Dominique Viart, "Ouverture: Blancheurs et minimalismes littéraires," *Ecritures blanches*, eds. Dominique Rabaté and Dominique Viart (Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2009) 7-26.

legitimately be read as "reflections of mutilated life,"[378] rather than express a dual uneasiness with language and the world, it embraces both as imperfect but necessary and inevitable, attempting to portray the human condition through an evocation of emotion and a rendering of diverse states of being.

[378] My translation of: "réflexions de la vie mutilée." Viart 26.

Chapter VI
"Links" Between "Events": The Mysteries of Interconnectivity

> Where we find ourselves is frequently not where we've sent ourselves. One day it happens we're awakened to the thought *Here. Here I am. Why?*
>
> - Joyce Carol Oates[379]

These lines read like a typical passage from an Oates novel. Wondering, the evocation of a certain disjointedness to life and the use of italics to communicate mysterious semi-conscious thoughts are all frequently identifiable aspects of her fiction. However, these lines are not taken from one of this study's corpus works or from any other work of Oates fiction, rather they are the opening lines to a work of non-fiction published by Oates in April 2001 in which she reflects back upon her time as a graduate student in Madison, Wisconsin from Fall 1960 to Spring 1961. In this text, which Oates calls "a fragmentary memoir of a lost time," memories of her time in Madison are interspersed with commentary on the surreal nature of it all as she attempts to tell the story of "a time for which there was no adequate language."[380] What is the meaning of life when it seems that humanity is granted by nothing more than a "whimsical shake of the dice?"[381] Or when we realize that crucial events in our lives do not absolutely determine us?[382] Oates's retrospective account of the early days of her adulthood recalls the mysterious disconnected nature of life as experienced by many of her characters for whom the need "to continually compose narratives to explain, contain, and justify ourselves"[383] is strong though the narratives are not always attainable. Indeed, as Dromoor reflects in *Rape: A Love Story*, "what links events is never so clear as the events themselves" (*RLS* 98).

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[379] Oates, "Nighthawk" 56.
[380] Oates, "Nighthawk" 72.
[381] Oates, "Nighthawk" 58.
[382] "[...] I'm forced to contemplate how we aren't absolutely determined by crucial events in our lives; an initial failure may release us to a new and more appropriate channel of action; we have the power to redefine ourselves, to heal our wounds, to fight back [...]." Oates, "Nighthawk" 71.
[383] Oates, "Nighthawk" 60.

"The earliest books to cast a spell on me," writes Oates in her introduction to *The Best American Mystery Stories 2005*, "were Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, nightmare adventures in the guise of a childhood classic, and Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*." The reason for this, she explains, is that "both Carroll and Poe create surreal worlds that seem unnervingly real, like images in a distorting mirror, and both explore mysteries without providing solutions."[384] This chapter continues to examine the evocation of mystery in Oates's fiction through a discussion of the elusive nature of interconnectivity raised by the stories and emphasized by their structures. What is it that brings people together? How are we to understand the true nature of cause and effect between events? How do the past and the present relate to each other?

The following passage from Oates's 2009 novel *Little Bird of Heaven* deals with the changes that take place in a family that has lost one of its members:

> After she was murdered they continued to live together in the house on Quarry Road except that they lived together now not as a father and a son awaiting the wife and mother who linked them but simply as a man designated as a "father" and a boy designated as a "son." Though neither Delray nor Aaron could have explained it, the distinction was crucial. And sometimes it was not much evident that the man was a "father" and the boy a "son" for often they went for a full day, a day and a night and yet another day without seeing each other and without speaking like sleepwalkers or ghosts inhabiting an identical accursed space.[385]

The enigmatic nature of bonds between individuals is evoked here through a father and son who have lost their feeling of interconnectedness due to the loss of the wife/mother. The tenuous nature of the links between people, a weak chain severed by the removal of a single link, is akin to the mysterious way events, too, are interconnected. A passage from Oates's story "Papa at Ketchum, 1961" illustrates this particularly well: "Except for the hoof-trampled snow, and the blood on the snow, and the old man on his ass in the snow wiping deer-blood and deer-spittle on his trousers, you would not have guessed that there had been any deer at

[384] Oates, *Best American Mystery Stories 2005* xiv.
[385] Joyce Carol Oates, *Little Bird of Heaven* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) 301.

all."[386] Indeed, Oates's fiction reminds us time and again that what we see are the effects of actions, not the actions themselves or what caused them. Linking them together, when one has not been a direct witness, as indeed most of the time one is not, is a matter of inference if it is possible at all. Our relationship to the links between events is similar to our experience of emotion. Oates quotes Yeats on the subject of emotion: "Yeats argues: 'Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in color or in form or in sound . . . and because these modulations . . . evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and writers . . . are continually making and un-making mankind.'" (*PA* 37) We do not see emotion; we see the effects of emotion. The problematic relationship between emotion and event is further developed by Oates in "Nighthawk" as she grapples with how to go about writing about her past:

> Emotions are the element in which we live, or fail to live; "events" seem to us comparatively detached; yet, in speaking of oneself, emotions are of no more interest than dreams; it's historic event that seems to matter, and one is baffled at how to match event with emotion, emotion with event. Our most profound experiences elude all speech, even spoken speech. What vocabulary to choose to attempt to evoke a flood of sheer, untrammeled emotion? – the common experiences of grief, terror, panic, falling-in-love, desperation-at-losing-love.[387]

The interconnectivity of emotion and event and the way in which we experience them, the ways in which they are linked together, is the subject of investigation in this chapter. I will discuss them not from the previously outlined thematic angle but through a discussion of the irregular structure of the narratives which seem to serve as a textual parallel.

In a 1981 interview with Sanford Pinsker, Oates was asked to comment on "the whole matter of 'experimentation'":

> "Experimentation" for its own sake has never interested me, but if a story's content – if its protagonist – is "post-modernist" in sensibility, then the style of the story will probably reflect this predilection. As time passes and I become more and more comfortable with telling a linear story and populating it with characters, I inevitably become more and more interested in the structures into

[386] Joyce Carol Oates, "Papa at Ketchum, 1961," *Wild Nights!* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 199. This story originally appeared in *Salmagundi* 155/156 (Summer 2007): 99-130.
[387] Oates, "Nighthawk" 61.

> which fiction can be put, and the kinds of language used to evoke them. But the degree of sophistication of my protagonist usually dictates the degree of sophistication of the story. I admit to a current fascination with the phenomenon of *time* – I seem to want to tell a story as if it were sheer lyric, all its components present simultaneously.[388]

Certainly the issues related to memory and the potentially confusing nature of the jumbled structure of her narratives that will be discussed in this chapter attest to the fact that Oates's interest in the phenomenon of time has not attenuated since this statement. Parts of *The Falls* might even be read as possessing some qualities of the "sheer lyric." The main chapters of Part III, for example, each offer the viewpoint of a different Burnaby sibling on events that take place during a unique timeframe. As Oates points out at the end of the Pinsker interview, "the components of a story, unlike those, say, of a painting, cannot be presented simultaneously."[389] However, at the close of *The Falls* the reader is left with the feeling that three voices have, indeed, been speaking at the same time. Once the picture is complete, we understand how the different parts of the three narratives intersect and intertwine.

As textual strategies such as the use of italics, repetition, and the use of ellipses and dashes contribute to enhancing the feeling of mystery set out thematically in the novels, so, too, the jumbled structure of the narrative often participates in this strategy. The characters themselves are frequently confused and the passages concerning them exhibit an often disconcertingly jumbled organization. Marilyn C. Wesley writes of a character in Oates's "Raven's Wing" that "his complex impotence is revealed through the story's skillful third-person limited omniscient point of view which presents the facts of his existence in the vocabulary of his typical responses to it."[390] Similarly, and in terms of our discussion, the characters's confusion about different mysterious elements of their lives is reinforced by the

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[388] Sanford Pinsker, "Speaking About Short Fiction: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in Short Fiction* 18.3 (Summer 1981): 241.
[389] Pinsker, "Speaking About Short Fiction" 243.
[390] Marilyn C. Wesley, "On Sport: Magic and Masculinity in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 3.1 (1991): 66.

jumbled structures at the level of individual paragraphs, whole chapters and sometimes the entire work.

2.6.1. Inferring Meaning, or Establishing "Links"

The ambiguous nature of events and their relationships is present in Oates's texts at two levels which, though distinct, are often difficult to separate out from the emotional environment of the text. At the thematic level, largely discussed in Part I, her characters are often presented as having difficulty making sense of the various experiences that make up their lives, the pieces never fit together into one neat puzzle. At the structural level, the focus of this section, Oates organizes her texts in such a way as to leave chronological narrative gaps that must, if filled in at all, be done so only by reader inference. However, due to the restricted narrative perspective she so often adopts, the two levels often coincide and it is not always "safe" to make such inferences.

Oates's most famous short story (certainly that which has been reprinted most often) is a classic example of a narrative puzzle that must be assembled "for better or worse" in spite of certain missing pieces. In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,"[391] Arnold Friend and Ellie Oscar drive to Connie's house while the rest of her family is away. Arnold wants to take Connie for a ride and become her lover. The story narrates the exchange between the two parties, Arnold standing in the driveway beside his car talking to Connie who is standing behind the screen door in the kitchen. Clarity of meaning and straightforwardness are not the criteria responsible for making this Oates's most anthologized story. Their absence, however, is certainly one of the reasons this is Oates's most written about work. Indeed, differences of opinion about how to interpret the story's various textual clues have sparked a

[391] Originally collected in *The Wheel of Love*, 1970. References here are from the later collection *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Selected Early Stories* (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1993) 118-136. Hereafter abbreviated as *WAYG*.

critical debate. Quite a few elements of the text are open to interpretation. Two of those that have inspired critical commentary are the mysterious numbers painted on the side of Arnold's car and the exact nature of his intentions toward Connie once he drives her away from her home. Three numbers are emblazoned on the side of his car; Arnold explains they are "a secret code." However, as C. Harold Hurley points out: "Oates, unfortunately, never explains the code's meaning."[392] In spite of the fact that Connie is unimpressed with the numbers – "He read off the numbers 33, 19, 17 and raised his eyebrows at her to see what she thought of that, but she didn't think much of it" (*WAYG* 124) – they remain one of the tantalizing unsolved mysteries of the text. Several critics have tried their hand at cracking the code. Mark Robson identifies a complex system of numerical encoding that points to two biblical passages from the Old Testament: Judges 19:17 and Genesis 19:17. He is able to draw parallels between these two passages and Oates's story.[393] Hurley chooses to follow a simpler code, interpreting the numbers through their sum, 69. Each argument, taken individually, is convincing though Robson's explanation does seem quite convoluted and to my knowledge, Oates has never given any indication of engaging in such complicated games. However, despite the fact that their codes are different, both men arrive at the conclusion that the numbers point to Arnold's sexually deviant nature. Whether one considers these numbers meaningless, trivial, or coded, their significance remains an interpretation based on the text but not expressly communicated by it.

Connie's fate is equally elliptical. She finally pushes open the door and walks out to join Arnold:

> "My sweet little blue-eyed girl," he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him – so much land that

[392] C. Harold Hurley, "Cracking the Secret Code in Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 24.1 (Winter 1987): 62.
[393] Mark Robson, "Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,'" *The Explicator* 40.4 (Summer 1982): 59-60.

> Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it. (*WAYG* 136)

In this passage, the discrepancy between the actual color of Connie's eyes and the color mentioned by Arnold reinforces the idea that he is a threat as it seems that he is detached from reality and playing out a fantasy. Indeed, the general interpretation of the ending is that "though it is not dramatized, she will surely be raped, murdered, and buried."[394]

As in the case with the numbers, however, interpretations of Connie's fate vary. G. J. Weinberger finds, for example, that Arnold Friend exists only in Connie's imagination. Thus, "Where Are You Going" is a story about the passage from childhood to adulthood.[395] This is also the interpretation of Mike Tierce and John Michael Crafton for whom Arnold is not evil, but rather a savior manifestation of Bob Dylan. As "a magical, musical messiah" "rising out of Connie's radio" he is "a manifestation of her own desires" that "frees her from the limitations of a fifteen-year-old girl, assisting her maturation by stripping her of her childlike vision."[396] The intensity of the critical debate over this story reinforces the notion that ambiguity is threatening. However, Oates's text resists the natural human desire to define meaning, continuing, instead, to offer another experience of unreadability. In this short story narrated from Connie's unique point of view the gaps at the thematic and structural levels of the text coincide. What Connie does not know, the reader does not know either and any supposition about the meaning of the numbers on the car, the way Friend came about his knowledge of her family or what he intends to do with Connie remain the domain of guesswork. As D. F. Hurley has astutely remarked, "the struggle between a nightmare and a nightmarish imitation of reality is not just Connie's but the reader's too."[397]

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[394] C. H. Hurley 66.
[395] G. J. Weinberger, "Who is Arnold Friend?: The Other Self in Joyce Carol Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,'" *American Imago* 45.2 (Summer 1988): 205-215.
[396] Mike Tierce and John Michael Crafton, "Connie's Tambouring Man: A New Reading of Arnold Friend," *Studies in Short Fiction* 22.2 (Spring 1985): 224.
[397] D. F. Hurley, "Impure Realism: Joyce Carol Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 28.3 (Summer 1991): 374.

Similar processes are at work in the four corpus works, each of which contain elements that remain mysterious to the very end. It is the particular way that the structure of the fiction invokes these mysteries that is of interest here. "*Between us there's a secret. / We have something in common, you and me. That will never change.* / Stonecrop never spoke so directly. Yet Juliet understood" (*TF* 451). The relationship between Juliet Burnaby and Bud Stonecrop in *The Falls* is characterized by silent communication and illustrates, at the narrative level, the act of inferring meaning in which Oates invites the reader to participate in order to fill out the signification of the novel. The relationship between Oates and the readers of her fiction is similar to that evoked in this passage between Juliet and Stonecrop. There are elements of the stories that are not expressly indicated in the narrative but that the reader is nevertheless invited to supply. These missing components may be divided into two categories: the graspable and the elusive. I call "graspable" elements those which are eventually revealed or which can logically be inferred by textual clues without sparking debate. These are elements which are potentially mysterious, albeit sometimes only momentarily, to the reader because not specifically addressed by the text but which are not mysterious in the fictional worlds they concern. All fictional realms imply such component parts, telling "all" is impractical, if not virtually impossible. "Elusive" elements, on the other hand, are those that retain their ambiguity to the very end; they are never satisfactorily answered by the texts, left open to the extent that they allow for the possibility of conflicting interpretations equally "justifiable" through different ways of reading the text, such as the various critical interpretations of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" discussed above. Textual components of an elusive nature often result when gaps coincide at both the thematic and structural levels, when, due to the nature of the narrative vantage point, that which is mysterious to the character involved remains a mystery to the reader as well. Wayne Booth has referred to this phenomenon as a "confusion of distances," explaining: "The deep plunges

of modern inside views, the various streams-of-consciousness that attempt to give the reader an effect of living thought and sensation, are capable of blinding us to the possibility of our making judgments not shared by the narrator or reflector himself."[398] This confusion results in an "ambiguity of effect" which may or may not be "unintentional" (the adjective used by Booth to qualify this ambiguity).[399]

In *The Falls*, there are incidences and understandings that occur in the world of the Burnaby's fictional Niagara Falls that are not explicitly communicated in the text. As previously mentioned, it is Royall who first begins investigating his father's past. He goes to the library to look through old newspapers. However, of all the information he was apparently able to discover, we are only provided with one piece: "Royall had learned, from the library, that Dirk Burnaby had been a veteran. Of World War II" (*TF* 335). Several months later, Chandler, who had initially refused to help Royall with his investigation because of a childhood promise made to his mother, starts making his own inquiries: "Through the spring of 1978 he made inquiries into Dirk Burnaby's life, and into his death. To understand one, he must understand the other" (*TF* 375). He tries to contact people who had known his father or been involved in the case. Most of them he either cannot find or they refuse to talk to him, but he is able to get testimony from five people. From one of his father's lawyer colleagues, referred to only as Hal, he learns that judge Howell was "obviously biased" and that "witnesses were under pressure" from the mob (*TF* 380). His father's former receptionist, Madelyn Seidman, tells him that nobody who knew Dirk well thought he killed himself (*TF* 381). The bailiff from the fatal Love Canal suit provides testimony affirming Dirk's integrity (*TF* 382). This is confirmed by Clive Colborne, Dirk's former best friend: "He was like a pioneer in that kind of law, now people look back on it. At the time it just seemed sort of crazy" (*TF* 383). Finally, Neil Lattimore, the young attorney who has picked up the litigation

[398] Booth 324.
[399] Booth 316.

in the story's present, makes two important statements: "Dirk Burnaby is a hero to us" and "The bastards killed him. You'll never prove it, though" (*TF* 385). Madelyn Seidman also informs Chandler that she has already spoken to his brother about the same subject "a few months ago" (*TF* 382). When the two brothers are finally reconciled after being "estranged for nearly six months" (*TF* 347), they compare notes:

> In a lowered, quavering voice Chandler told Royall all that he'd learned about their father. These past several weeks. Royall then told Chandler all that he'd learned about their father. These past several months. (*TF* 388)

However, aside from Royall's comment to his brother that "some people say, maybe he was killed" (*TF* 388) we do not learn anything else about the information uncovered by Royall himself. We might safely assume that his investigation unearthed the same information as his brother's, but we do not know for sure; the question is avoided in the text. This example might seem trivial at first glance, however, it is simply an example of inference located at the most graspable end of the scale, one of the least disturbing "missing" elements occulted by the jumbled nature of the narrative. Though the reader is not provided with a detailed list of the information gleaned by Royall through his investigation, in the fictional world of *The Falls* this information exists and Royall "knows" it.[400]

Likewise, another seemingly non-enigmatic gap – the very nature of a gap is to open onto the enigmatic – concerns the details of what takes place in *Beasts* between Gillian and André Harrow when she goes to his office to surrender herself to him. A blank on the page separates two sections of text. The passage that ends with André forcing Gillian to the floor of his office and expressing how long he has been waiting for her is followed by a gap which separates it from the next section beginning "When we left the darkened Humanities Building it was sometime after seven" (*B* 86). Nearly two hours have gone by, Gillian had presented

[400] It seems logical that Oates would seek to avoid the repetition of facts about Dirk Burnaby available to the reader in Parts I and II of the novel. However, if this is the case, the tidbit unearthed by Royall about his father's military service is a counter example, the reader having previously learned that Dirk was a veteran. Perhaps it is simply offered as "proof" that non-academic Royall was actually in the library doing research.

herself at the office at five-fifteen (*B* 83). Oates tantalizes her reader with the knowledge that two hours of narrative time are contained in this blank gap between paragraphs, two hours that will never be expressly filled in. However, though the events themselves remain forever the domain of textual ellipse, there is evidence of them in the marks they leave on Gillian whose mouth is "bruised" and "aching" and who must visit the lavatory to fix herself up before leaving the building (*B* 86). Thus, the reader takes on the role of textual detective, interpreting these clues, in the context of Gillian's self-expressed desire and André Harrow's aggressive behavior, as proof that something of an inappropriate sexual nature has transpired between the professor and his student in the space of these missing hours.

At the other end of the spectrum are missing elements that the reader cannot infer with any degree of certainty such as the exact nature of Gillian's relationship to the campus arsons in *Beasts* or the origin of Alma's tattoos, centrally important as indicated by the title *The Tattooed Girl* yet forever shrouded in inexplicability. These elements are generally connected to the elusiveness of motives and inexplicit nature of reasons for events which plague both characters and reader alike. In other examples, as if to insist on the tenuous nature of inferences themselves, Oates initially encourages a certain interpretation before ultimately proving it wrong. Such is the case in *The Falls* with the discrepancy that exists between certain paratextual indications and narrative content itself. The three parts of *The Falls* are entitled "Honeymoon," "Marriage" and "Family" respectively, as indicated by the table of contents. These labels represent three phases of a traditional married life leading to the expectation that the novel will recount the traditional evolution of a couple who marries and sets about having children. However, from the very first pages, Oates sets about breaking these expectations. Rather than the supposed idyllic interlude, the "honeymoon" is a nightmarish affair culminating in the groom's suicide. The marriage in Part II is a completely different one than that referred to by the title of Part I. The family of Part III is the end result

of the combined marriages, not the one initially evoked by the traditional chronology. Thus, the story recounts not the nice tidy package of a traditionally structured life, but rather something much more evocative of a cobwebby form, appropriately one of Oates's recurrent images.

Oates's choice of narrative structure only enhances the sneaky suspicion of missing links that haunts the reader. None of the corpus works are narrated by a third-person fully omniscient narrator willing and able to speculate on the interconnectivity of the narrated events. Instead, Oates's texts more often resemble a collage-like assemblage of images with no explicitly voiced narrative direction to link them. This is perhaps most evident in her novellas where the passages tend to be shorter. A discussion of the chapter "The Vigil" (*RLS* 47-57) from Part I of *Rape: A Love Story* will serve to illustrate the cinematic image-centered quality of Oates's fiction. Told from Bethie's point of view, this chapter recounts her and her grandmother's "vigil" at Teena's hospital bedside as they wait for her hoped-for recovery. Short passages of text, often no more than a brief sentence or two, are set apart from each other by blank lines. Short informative sentences report the facts of the experience: "She was not able to breathe on her own. She was fed intravenously. A catheter drained toxins from her body in a continual thin stream. Speaking to your grandmother, the neurologist was awkward, evasive" (*RLS* 47). The events related by Bethie in this chapter are a sampling of anecdotes and memorable moments taken from the long period of hospitalization endured at her mother's side. The narrative proceeds in a succession of film-like images: Teena is unconscious, her frightened mother and daughter can do nothing but pray and hope; Teena begins to wake up; Teena wakes up, momentarily innocent due to memory loss; Ray Casey comes for awkward visits; flowers and cards fill the room; friends and family visit, anxiously wondering whether Teena will recover; Teena's state allows Bethie to revert to childish innocence, safe in her mother's arms; patches of conversations are reported; the healing

process continues; Dromoor sends flowers; detectives visit; life outside the hospital gradually regains a stronger and stronger hold over them. Though the chapter is forward-moving – Teena's physical healing gradually progresses from start to finish – the pace is irregular. Precise chronological events such as when Teena begins to open her eyes on the sixth day (*RLS* 48) and when she is beginning to remember certain things about her experience on the twelfth day (*RLS* 53) are intermingled with generalizations associated with the "routines of convalescence" (*RLS* 54): "The room is filling up with flowers and cards" (*RLS* 49); "When relatives enter the room, it isn't the same" (*RLS* 50). From the space between the passages emerges the image of a young girl waiting in a limbo of conflictual desires. Bethie's memory has not been affected. She remembers her arm "yanked out of its socket with a *crack!*," Haaber kicking her, and being called a "little cunt" (*RLS* 50). Yet her mother's ignorant invalid state allows her the possibility of pretending, of behaving like a child and being snuggled by her mother. Bethie surely wants her mother to recover, but she knows that this recovery will coincide with the recurrence of insecurity in their lives (police investigation, leaving the safe hospital enclosure, facing the condemning eyes of strangers, worrying about the whereabouts of the enemy, proving their victimization in a court of law) which is why she desperately "want[s] the vigil never to end" (*RLS* 51).

In the extreme, actual images are represented on the page as is the case in *Rape: A Love Story* with the reproductions of Dromoor's handwriting and Teena's postcard to Bethie. Why are the author's words so insufficient in these instances that they must be replaced by images? Coming across such an image in a work of narrative fiction is always a surprise to the reader who can but wonder at its meaning. Is the image used for expediency? To show directly rather than describe? Or is there a more profound motive? Do Dromoor's intentions seem more genuine and sincere when we see "his" handwriting reproduced on the page rather than the same message in the typed print of the rest of the narrative? In any event, these

various techniques force the reader to supply his own meaning of the links between events, leaving them open to multiple interpretations and never completely precluding the existence of interpretive doubt. Such openness, though frustrating in a work of fiction, is an ever-present component of everyday life which Oates claims to attempt to mirror in her fiction.

The notion of reader-solicited connection discussed in this section can be understood in terms of Wolfgang Iser's theory put forward in *The Act of Reading*. Iser explains that gaps and inconsistencies are essential aspects of texts which allow for the creation of meaning derived from the process of reading. "Consistency-building" is the term he gives to the process each individual reader engages in of assembling and interpreting textual clues. Different interpretations are possible because different patterns of clue assembly are possible. However, no interpretation is necessarily "right" or "wrong":

> As a structure of comprehension [consistency-building] depends on the reader and not on the work, and as such it is inextricably bound up with subjective factors and, above all, the habitual orientations of the reader. This is why modern literary works are so full of apparent inconsistencies – not because they are badly constructed, but because such breaks act as hindrances to comprehension, and so force us to reject our habitual orientations as inadequate. If one tries to ignore such breaks, or to condemn them as faults in accordance with classical norms, one is in fact attempting to rob them of their function.[401]

This function is that of initiating, as Iser writes further on, a "performance" of meaning,[402] the result of the dialectical relationship between text and reader in which the reader "composes" a message out of the clues assembled from the transmitted text,[403] in a process similar to that of Hillis Miller's ethical imperative discussed earlier.

Iser's theory applies to all fictional texts. However, the above discussion and complementary ones that follow should make clear the way in which Oates's compositional strategies both facilitate and force this process. My goal is to show – through focusing on the

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[401] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 18.
[402] Iser, *Act of Reading* 26-27.
[403] Iser, *Act of Reading* 21.

process rather than the product, as Iser calls for[404] – how the textual strategies both parallel the thematic mysteries evoked by the texts and provide a vehicle for them, enveloping the reader in a multi-layered, open-ended fictional world that is at once both unsettling and familiar. Unsettling because, as Iser shows in the first chapter of *The Act of Reading*, we tend to approach books with the idea that they have some absolute truth to impart and feel ill-at-ease when we cannot find it, and familiar due to the proximity of the feelings and events evoked to actual elements of our experience.

2.6.2. Jumbled Narrative Structure

The existence of narrative gaps pulls the reader in by implicating him in the creation of the text's meaning. However, the association of parallel levels of experience simultaneously multiplies instances of meaning and reinforces the elusiveness of truth, and the act of creating meaning ultimately becomes problematic. The reader may be a detective, but one whose powers of detection are limited by the points of view through which he experiences the events. Whereas the chronological gaps discussed in the previous section exploit the reader's ability to supply the meaning of a text, the jumbled structures discussed in this section are a factor of the comprehension problems of the actual characters themselves.

To textually represent the confused way in which her characters experience their worlds, Oates has recourse to the structural strategy of presenting her narrative in collage-like fashion. It is up to the reader to identify the pieces of the puzzle and reorder them in chronological fashion. Though the stories generally progress in a forward-moving fashion, the frequency of changes between points of view, scenes and timeframes occupying the

[404] "As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects." Iser, *Act of Reading* 18.

characters' thoughts create the effect of what can seem like a haphazard, jumbled collection of word images.

Toward the end of the previous section, I discussed the hospital vigil chapter from *Rape: A Love Story*, pointing out the vivid imagistic quality of the successive scenes, each paragraph set apart from the others by blank lines, a suggestive collection of memories and experiences whose overall meaning is in the effect of their accumulation. Oates herself often speaks of her writing as "cinematic," as when in an article for *Smithsonian* she reflects back on places of her childhood, one of which is Lockport's Palace Theater: "These movies of the 1950s [...] inspired me to a cinematic sort of storytelling, driven by character and plot; as a writer I would strive for the fluency, suspense and heightened drama of film, its quick cuts and leaps in time."[405] Certainly "quick cuts" and "leaps in time" are prevalent features of Oates's recent fiction, participating in the creation of a narrative structure that is constantly reaching for elements of different timeframes and realities to compose a text of an empirically "spectral" nature, in Marc Guillaume's understanding of *spectralité* as the diffusion of the subject and ignorance of otherness,[406] a concept that will be discussed at length in the next chapter. The diffusion of self is foregrounded in Oates's fiction through the use of techniques such as absent signposting and frequent recourse to flashbacks which both show that the subjects' attention is often dispersed and illustrate their confusion about the import of various experiences (whether present, past or even future).

2.6.2.1. Absent Signposting

In addition to the frequent occurrence of quick jumps between set-apart sections of text that can represent a shift in scene, chronology or even point of view, there is another form

[405] Joyce Carol Oates, "Joyce Carol Oates Goes Home Again," *Smithsonian* 40.12 (March 2010): 83-84.
[406] "To summarize," writes Guillaume, "*spectralité* is neither the destruction of the subject nor its disappearance but its scattering." My translation of: "En résumé, la spectralité ce n'est pas la destruction du sujet, ni sa disparition, c'est sa dispersion." Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, *Figures de l'altérité* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1994) 36.

of textual "jump" that can operate within the text of a paragraph. Communicating the dispersed nature of a character's thoughts, it can also produce momentary confusion on the part of the reader attempting to follow these thoughts. I am referring here to the feeling of disorientation that can result from the fact that not all changes in perspective in the text are signposted (ex: "he thought ..." / "she remembered ..."). Characters' thoughts often jump around several times within a given passage, linked only by the most tenuous of relational threads. A passage from Part III of *The Falls* will serve as an example:

> Downstairs in the principal's office Chandler telephoned the Crisis Center and was given information, directions to the site of the "gunman/hostage" situation on the east side. Within minutes he was in his car, driving east on Falls Street past Tenth Street, Memorial Drive, Acheson Drive. All his senses were alert as if he'd been plunged into ice water. Feeling like an arrow being shot – swiftly, unerringly, as Chandler himself could never shoot an arrow – to its target.
>
> *God willing*. That wry fatalism, which was Ariah's fatalism, too. For you never knew, summoned by the Crisis Center, whether this would be the emergency from which you, the energetic volunteer, would not return.
>
> *Penance, is it? This life of yours. But if you love me why would you do penance?*
>
> He did love Melinda. He loved Melinda's baby daughter to whom he hoped to be a father, someday. But he couldn't answer her question.
>
> Ariah had ceased asking. In the season of Chandler's first active involvement in the Crisis Center, his first year as a teacher in the Niagara Falls public school system, she'd registered her sharp disapproval of her elder son's "reckless, dangerous" volunteer work, and Ariah wasn't one to persist where she knew she could not succeed.
>
> These days, Chandler dealt with the problem by not telling Melinda, if he could avoid it. And certainly not telling Ariah.
>
> "Gunman/hostage." Chandler had intervened in only one of these situations before, a deranged man holding two of his own children hostage in his home, and it had not ended happily. And it had lasted well into the night. (*TF* 342-343)

Driving from the Junior High to the site of his crisis intervention, Chandler's "senses" may be "alert," but his mind is jumpy. Physically he may be on task, "like an arrow being shot to its target," mentally, however, his thoughts flit around to a variety of related issues. Each short paragraph represents a shift in mental direction. The memory of his strange parting words to

his students ("God willing")[407] reminds him of a personality trait he shares with his mother in response to the unknown, uncontrollable nature of the future. The following italicized passage is problematic as it is unclear whose words Chandler is remembering.[408] Indeed, one of Oates's favorite techniques is to first present an element and only after to provide, or perhaps only allude to, the means to understanding it. Her incipits provide classic examples of this: "In the Oceania wing of the Louvre I saw it: *the* totem" (*B* 1, emphasis added); "*At the time unknown, unnamed*, the individual who was to throw himself into the Horseshoe Falls appeared to the gatekeeper of the Goat Island Suspension Bridge at approximately 6:15 A.M." (*TF* 3, emphasis added); not to mention the opening lines of the chapter currently under discussion, "*Why? Because I need to help others*" (*TF* 341). Yes, why, indeed. But, why what? Whose is this voice and what is it talking about? The above section allows us to attribute the chapter's opening words to Chandler. They seem to be a failed attempt to formulate a response to a question. Returning to the passage in question, it may even be in response to the question about penance refered to prior to this brief discussion. But who would ask such a thing of Chandler? His girlfriend, Melinda, it seems, to whom his thoughts next turn as he reflects on the nature of their relationship. His attention then moves back to his mother who also disapproves of his volunteering, but this memory associated with Ariah is located farther back in the past. Next, the subject skips back to the present and Chandler's ostrich-like solution to the problem. Finally his attention returns to the situation at hand, but only for a brief second as he is reminded of his involvement in a similar situation and his thoughts return to the past. In this way it is the "jumbled" nature of the novel's timeline which paradoxically provides the means for future transcendence as present events enable the characters to explore the past and come to realizations that will help them evolve in the future.

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[407] "*God willing*. Why'd Chandler say such a thing? He wasn't one to dramatize danger, or himself. And he neither believed in God nor presented his subject to fourteen-year-olds in any way that might be construed as predicated upon a belief in God." (*TF* 342)

[408] See Chapter 5, Section 2 about the role of such italicized passages in the texts.

As Wayne Booth points out, "any sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator."[409] Thus, Chandler, as the narrator of this passage, takes the reader on a roller coaster ride through memory and experience, abruptly shifting between various temporal memory snippets. The instability and elusiveness of memory has been at the heart of the discussion since the beginning of the chapter as the notion of creating links between events is inseparable from the way in which these events are remembered. In the above passage, Chandler's thoughts continually flow, albeit erratically, along the chronological timeline of his existence. Another more disruptive memory intrusion occurs with the eruption of non-assimilated memories in a character's consciousness, a leap in time otherwise known as a flashback.

2.6.2.2. Flashbacks

For the most part, Oates's characters are not visionaries possessed with the power of seeing into the future. Thus, movement through time in her texts, unstable and ungraspable as it sometimes is, is primarily restricted to jumps between the present and varying lengths of time in the past. "Leaps in time," one aspect of Oates's self-described cinematic style,[410] are present in the texts on two different levels. First, at the structural level in the way Oates frequently jumps between scenes and perspectives. Second, at a more thematic level, in the way her characters, troubled by traumatic events from their pasts, find themselves mentally reliving these events through memory flashes.

When *Rape: A Love Story* opens, a crime has already been committed. The opening paragraph informs the reader that Teena Maguire "was gang-raped, kicked and beaten and left to die" in front of her twelve-year-old daughter, Bethie, by a gang of "drunken guys" (*RLS* 3). The novella is divided into three parts, each representing a different span on the timeline of

[409] Booth 164.
[410] Oates, "Oates Goes Home Again" 84.

the characters' experience. Part I deals with the period from the crime to the preliminary hearing before the court. Part II takes up after the preliminary hearing and relates continuing harassment of the victims by the four principal suspects who are out on bail, culminating in the systematic elimination of these four same suspects. Finally, Part III, a single short chapter, jumps ahead to Bethie as a married adult woman in New York City, finally revealing the vantage point from which she has been reflecting back on these traumatic events from her childhood. Despite the initially straightforward-seeming organization of the story in chronologically organized sequences, the events within the parts are not narrated in strict chronological order;[411] rather, they are presented as a series of fragmented flashbacks, memories returning seemingly piecemeal to the characters' minds with the story of the crime, the story of what follows and certain background events all intermingled.

Though the various events are related through the points of view of several different focalizers including Bethie (the daughter), Teena (the rape victim), John Dromoor (the police officer) and the assistant D.A., Bethie's point of view is the main focalizer. In the first chapter, Bethie's character introduces the story by relating "some of the things that would be said of [her] mother Teena Maguire after she was gang-raped, kicked and beaten and left to die on the floor of the filthy boathouse at Rocky Point Park in the early minutes of July 5, 1996" (*RLS* 6). The final chapter returns to Bethie "years later," in "another world," the "world of urban New York City"; she is reflecting back on these events from her childhood (*RLS* 153). Bethie is, in a loose sense, the story's mediator, the intermediary through which the events are recounted. Bethie is telling herself the story and so she is referred to using the pronoun "you."

The information here is remembered and presented to the reader in fragments. A brief examination of the subject matter of the first few chapters will give an idea of the fragmented nature of the plot. Chapter 1 introduces certain facts related to the gang rape in the context of

[411] Similar to the contrast in *The Falls* previously discussed between the nature of the part titles and part contents.

gossip that will circulate afterwards. The second chapter introduces John Dromoor, the cop, characterizing him as a hard-boiled type. Chapter 3 flashes even further back to the night Teena and Dromoor first met nearly two years earlier. Chapters 4 and 5 reflect on the aleatory nature of events, and the "bad luck" corresponding to Teena's decision to leave the 4th of July party with Bethie and walk home through the park. Not until Chapter 6 does the text return specifically to the events in the boathouse. And so on, and so forth. Concerning the crime introduced in the very first sentence, various elements are revealed through a succession of different memories that drop into place like puzzle pieces throughout the first chapters. The effect created is that of one memory sparking another to form a chain similar to that of Chandler's set of thoughts in the above discussion, though much longer. The memory chain created by Bethie in *Rape: A Love Story* takes up nearly one third of the novella; the reader does not receive the final elements needed to reconstruct the "story" of the horrific experience until forty pages into the book in chapter eleven, at which point Bethie is looking at police photographs, trying to identify the attackers, and the sight of a familiar face triggers a memory flash:

> The guy with the sand-colored hair falling in his face. Sexy like a rock star except his face was broken out in pimples.
>
> Jeering and nasty he'd been, rushing at you. Grabbing at your mother and trying to kiss her. Grabbing at her breasts. Teeeena!
>
> You realized now, he'd led the others. He was their leader. You knew. (*RLS* 40)

Bethie's identification of Marvin Pick as the leader of the attack and her memory of certain of his actions towards her and her mother are the final elements of that traumatic night to be remembered and reported by Bethie in her narrative.

Wayne Booth writes about "a technique using flashbacks" being "more realistic than the old-fashioned, routine chronology." [412] Indeed, this technique is widely employed by Oates and is present in most of her work. In *Rape: A Love Story*, the flashback narrative

[412] Booth 191.

organisation together with short, descriptive, cinematic sentences seems very realistic in conveying the trauma of the rape experience through the intensity of the language. Here is an example taken from one of Bethie's memory flashbacks:

> Wedged in a corner of the boathouse. Behind, partially beneath stacked upside-down canoes.
>
> You'd crawled desperate to escape. On your stomach, on raw-scraped elbows. Dragging yourself like a wounded snake. As one of them kicked you. Cursed you kicking your back, your thighs, your legs as if he wanted to break all your bones in his fury. (*RLS* 29)

If this narrative strategy is "realistic," what does that tell us about the way Bethie mentally processes these violent experiences? The memory of the gang rape is remembered in pieces, however, not only is the whole fragmented, but the fragments are also chronologically disordered, making an overall view of the events even more difficult. The reader attempting to reorder the pieces in chronological sequence will discover certain gaps, gaps which Bethie's statement "You would tell what you could remember" makes no attempt to dissimulate (*RLS* 37). For example, how did she go from her hiding spot under the canoes to stopping a motorist to ask for help once the assault was over? Bethie remembers the experience as a collage of vivid images and impressions rather than as a sequence of specific events associated with specific moments on a chronology. The chapter "In Hiding" which concerns the twenty minutes Bethie spent "wedged in a corner of the boathouse" reports her recollections of the horrific experience – "You heard your mother's cries, stifled screams. You heard her pleading with them. You heard them laugh at her. [...] You heard them kicking your mother. Soft-thudding blows against unresisting flesh" – however we understand that the memories that fill this chapter are of events that happened simultaneously. This memory is not "pure," in the sense of it being an accurate report of what she was thinking and feeling at the time if such a thing is even possible, but is rather a combination of girl-Bethie's memory and adult-Bethie's analysis, as indicated in certain reflections which show that the memory is being enhanced by knowledge acquired after the experience: "You did not think *rape*. The

word *rape* was not yet a word in your vocabulary"; "You could not know how there was a radiant madness in their faces, a glisten to their wolf-eyes, a sheen to their damp teeth" (*RLS* 29-31).

The disjointed nature of the memories, then, serves as an indication, at the narrative level, that violence escapes the rationale of the character. Most violent things escape us and are therefore lost, only represented as black holes in memory because we cannot face them, a sort of coping process through erasure. Bertrand Gervais writes about this phenomenon in relation to the performer of the violent act; he speaks of a "forgetting" (*oubli*), a sort of amnesia that allows the individual to protect himself from the knowledge of his own violence.[413] This idea is certainly relevant to the perpetrators of violence in *Rape: A Love Story* who do not consider themselves responsible because they do not remember ever making a conscious decision to hurt anyone. However, the process of dealing with memories of violence seems to be similar for its victim as well. Discussing Emmanuel Carrère's *L'Adversaire*, Gervais writes about the truth being admitted in homeopathic doses because recognition of the violence of his acts would annihilate the subject.[414] Likewise, from the point of view of the victims in *Rape: A Love Story*, the memory flashbacks are a way of confronting the traumatic experience in homeopathic doses. The protective nature of this mechanism is confirmed by the anguish felt by Teena once it breaks down. It is when the full memory of her experience returns to her that her major emotional distress begins. In *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Freud defines trauma as "a lived event which, in the space of very little time, causes such an increase of excitement in the psychic life that its suppression or assimilation by normal means becomes an impossible task, the effect of which is lasting

[413] Bertrand Gervais, "La ligne de flottaison: violence, silence et oubli," *Cahiers électroniques de l'imaginaire* 4 (2006): 9.
[414] Gervais 9-10.

trouble in the use of one's energy."[415] This is certainly an apt description of Bethie's state; as an adult she continues to be troubled the resurgence of memories linked to the traumatic experience of her childhood. The paradox of trauma, writes Marc Amfreville, is that it simultaneously "aims to revisit *and* erase its very source."[416] This tension is communicated in *Rape: A Love Story* through the disjointed nature of the narrative created by the juxtaposition of memory flashes which both dissimulate and foreground the incompleteness of Bethie's knowledge of the event. Indeed, as Amfreville points out, inaccessibility of meaning is inherently integrated into texts of trauma: "this psychic phenomenon, due to its nature which lies between erasure and trace, establishes a poetics of emergence but also of the ultimate inaccessibility of meaning."[417] The reader is no more able than the character to make sense of the traumatic experience.

By choosing to refer to Oates's persistent blending of past and present periods of her characters' lives as "jumbled" narration, I am referring to the effect which seems to demand reader attentiveness and not to the writer's process in creating her text. Of course, what appears lacunary in the reading process is in fact thoroughly structured by the author, the result of much careful revision as she seeks to create a desired effect. I do not wish to undermine this fact by referring to her fiction as "jumbled," rather to point out the complexity of the fiction's structures.

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[415] My translation of: "un événement vécu qui, en l'espace de peu de temps, apporte dans la vie psychique un tel surcroît d'excitation que sa suppression ou son assimilation par les voies normales devient une tâche impossible, ce qui a pour effet des troubles durables dans l'utilisation de l'énergie." Marc Amfreville, *Ecrits en souffrance* (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2009) 27.

[416] My translation of: "le trauma vise à la réédition *et* à l'effacement de sa propre source." Amfreville, *Ecrits en souffrance*, 194.

[417] My translation of: "ce phénomène psychique, de par sa nature même entre effacement et trace, instaure une poétique de l'affleurement mais aussi de l'ultime inaccessibilité du sens." Amfreville, *Ecrits en souffrance*, 59.

2.6.3. Communal Narration

> I seem to have an imagination bent upon enhancing, developing, investigating alternate points of view ...
> - Joyce Carol Oates[418]

In her article about *Unholy Loves*, Brenda Daly identifies the novel's structure as one of what she terms "communal narration" and cites Susan S. Lanser who explains that "communal narration is 'a collective voice or voices that share narrative authority.'"[419] Daly discusses the structure of this 1979 Oates novel in terms of its multiple viewpoints, which recalls certain elements of my discussions of *The Falls*, *The Tattooed Girl* and *Rape: A Love Story*,[420] claiming that "Oates employs a communal narrative voice in this academic novel, orchestrating the voices, male and female, in a structure that – though it appears linear or sequential – turns out to be something like a song cycle."[421] In *Unholy Loves*, the voices of different members of the novel's academic community are arranged in sequential chapters which allows Oates to show both the public and private personas of her characters. Thus, the story is not told by one character with narrative authority, rather it is the result of a collective vision. The structure of the novel, therefore, parallels the dual message of the importance of community and the importance of taking responsibility for one's own story that it delivers. Daly suggests that this is a feminist problematic because it involves the "task of unmasking and exposing the structures of authority"[422] and depicts a female character who realizes, by the end of the story, that she must use language to express, and be responsible for, her own voice.

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[418] Greg Johnson, "Fictions of the New Millennium" 390.
[419] Brenda Daly, "Marriage as Emancipatory Metaphor: A Woman Wedded to Teaching and Writing in Oates's *Unholy Loves*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37.4 (Summer 1996): 272. Attributed to Susan S. Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 21.
[420] *Beasts* is different as it is entirely narrated from Gillian's first person perspective.
[421] Daly, "Marriage" 275.
[422] Daly, "Marriage" 275. In another work, Daly explains that "employing communal narrators" is a way of redefining "narrative voice as multivocal rather than individual" and thus challenging "novelistic conventions that perpetuate a 'masculine,' individualistic concept of authorship" (*Lavish Self-Divisions* xi).

Likewise, Perry Nodelman has written about the innovative structure of Oates's *Bellefleur* which he calls "a kind of writing that is neither conventional nor conventionally innovative, a novel whose innovations represent an identifiably feminine form of experimentation."[423] Nodelman bases his assessment on the fact that Oates's novel combines the "flow" associated with women's writing with a challenge to linear history: "We do not move from beginning to end. We do not get complete stories in any given chapter or section. Instead, we are immersed in a sea of competing stories."[424] *Bellefleur*'s stories pile up, interlock, intertwine, break off and are picked up pages later, if at all. The innovative crazy quilt structure of the narrative marks a new phase in Oates's writing, according to Nodelman, allowing her to accomplish two things:

> as in her earlier work she reveals how human perception is always an act of fiction-making, and always limited – always merely one of myriad different ways of making connections; and as she had not done before *Bellefleur*, she effectively captures a sense of a world outside all the fictions – a crazy quilt that contains or evokes worlds beyond all the conflicting explanations, beyond all the stories that people make up about it.[425]

Though there are still many mysteries left unexplained at the close of *Bellefleur*, the stories do eventually come together to form a conventional linear chronology. Thus, Nodelman considers that Oates revitalizes the masculine form not by abandoning it completely but rather by combining it with a more feminine conception of time. This technique of narrative organization is also present in the works studied here though on a much smaller scale. Even *The Falls*, the longest of the four, does not have the scope of *Bellefleur*. However, the juxtaposition of viewpoints and overlapping of stories are still relevant.

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[423] Perry Nodelman, "The Sense of Unending: Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur* as an Experiment in Feminine Storytelling," *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 251.
[424] Nodelman 259.
[425] Nodelman 260.

The multiple viewpoint technique at work in the corpus works is akin to what Nodelman has called Oates's "sense of unending"[426] and Daly has termed "communal narration." It ultimately allows for a broader understanding of an issue in a technique similar to that of a maieutics. The dialogical nature of the alternation between perspectives and points of view affords the reader an overall understanding much more complex than that of any individual character, making the elusiveness of meaning all the more concrete. Such a technique, though potentially rich in terms of the evocation of meaning, can also be disconcerting as John Mullan's comments on changing narrative point-of-view in *The Falls* point out:

> Such a narrative changes its sympathies as the years roll past. Sensible novels do not usually risk this: establishing one character as the focus of our interest, only to leave him or her behind. In *The Falls*, this is elaborately and deliberately disconcerting. Much of the novelist's effort in the early chapters is given to imagining – to inhabiting – the thought of Ariah as an inexperienced young woman in the early 1950s. [...] Yet, by the second half of the book, when her children become the central characters, she has become distant from us. [...] The young woman who falls in love and marries in the early chapters is, by the end, dimly recalling a husband who died "so long ago."[427]

Though this might be a valid criticism concerning the character Ariah, Oates's technique allows her to thus convey the distance at work in the relationship between Ariah and her children, an effective evocation of the "generation gap" that divides them. In addition, a narrative that changes "sympathies" from one decade to another transmits the notion of life as a continuing process which evolves, whether we understand it or not, in the same way that erosion and time, as taught by Chandler to his Junior High students, cause the geographical lay of the land to evolve.

This communal narration or multiple viewpoint technique can help the reader in coming to an overall understanding of a story. At times it allows the reader a more complete picture as when, to take a simple minor example, in *The Tattooed Girl*, both Seigl and Dmitri

[426] Nodelman 259.
[427] John Mullan, "The family way," *The Guardian* (28 July 2007).

speculate about Alma's age but she is actually able to divulge it once it comes her turn to be the focalizer of the narrative. This complex portrayal of Alma's character, both through her own eyes and through the eyes of other characters, allows us to simultaneously see her personality both from the inside out and from the outside in. The fact that both Seigl and Dmitri misinterpret Alma's age communicates valuable information about both how Alma behaves in different circumstances and how the two men relate differently to women; information that is evident to the reader once the various behaviors can be compared but that none of them are capable of stating explicitly.

On the other hand, however, the juxtaposition of points of view does not necessarily afford one a "complete" picture of events. As John Mullan implies in his comments about *The Falls*, in other instances, the compilation of multiple viewpoints only enhances the feeling of mystery, as Gillian observes in the aftermath of Marisa's suicide attempt in *Beasts*:

> I had to know, I plied Cassie with questions. Her account of what had happened differed in some minor details from Dominique's account, and Penelope's. The campus paper reported a chronology of events as Catamount township police determined them, and campus security confirmed, so there came to be a consensus of *what had happened* in the early hours of that Saturday morning. Yet somehow it didn't seem complete, there must have been something missing. (*B* 88)

This paragraph is followed by a narrative presentation of the facts of Marisa's suicide attempt as Gillian has been able to assemble them. Gillian has recourse to this assemblage of testimonies because, as she says, she herself "hadn't been a witness to any of this" (*B* 89). Perhaps her feeling of the story's incompleteness simply stems from the fact that she has acquired her information secondhand. However, upon further reflection, there is an element of Marisa's descent into madness that is jarringly missing from the account of events. Unsurprisingly, upon rereading the facts of the case, the element which is blatantly absent is that of motive. Gillian has learned who, what, when, where and how, but nothing in her narrative of the events indicates why Marisa acted in such a shocking way. Similarly, the

senselessness of the brutal crime against Teena and her daughter in *Rape: A Love Story* is compounded by being broached from several different characters' points of view, none of whom are able to provide a satisfactory answer regarding the question of motive, not even the perpetrators themselves.

Thus, the communal narration technique conveys the illusion of a more complex point of view while at the same time insisting on the frequent impossibility of reconstructing a complete vision of an event or attributing meaning through the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives. In this respect, the maieutics of Oates's communal narration ultimately fails to reveal hidden meaning, revealing instead the black hole that Oates leaves in place where we expect to find meaning.

In the first section of this chapter I drew a parallel between Oates's frequent metaphoric invocation of cobwebs and the complicated interconnectivity of her narratives. Indeed, the text itself might be imagined as a web spun by its author in which the threads represent the interlocking strands of the narrative and the space between them the gaps in meaning, chronological time and narrative direction. Brenda Daly evokes Oates's use of the connectivity of the web image in "The Art of Democracy": "Yet in the novels of Oates or Smith, these nets or webs of connectedness, however painfully they may be experienced in a competitive society, suggest the human potential for deeper, psychic connections." Daly suggests that the use of a web or a net as a recurring image is intended "to counter the violence engendered by the myth of the isolated self" and remind "readers of their interconnectedness."[428] This may be true, however, it is worth remembering that Oates's stance on interconnectivity has been an ongoing but neutral one. What I mean is that the interconnected nature of Oates's fictional worlds is neither positive nor negative, it simply *is*.

[428] Daly, "The Art of Democracy" 473.

Similarly, Oates's use of web and spider imagery is ultimately ambiguous, invoking at once both the frightening and the fragile.

Cobwebs and spiders constitute a periodically recurring motif throughout *The Tattooed Girl* typically associated with female characters and their ability to entrap. For example, at the end of Alma's first day of work, Seigl discovers her "cobwebby" scarf on the floor: "Seigl lifted the long narrow gauzy scarf, made of layers of a cheap cobwebby rose fabric, to his nose, to smell. Whatever this scent was, it was Alma's" (*TTG* 96). It is clear at the end of the chapter that Seigl has been caught in the web; the emphasis is on the ability of the woman to entrap and ensnare with her "web." There is a similar sinister insinuation in Seigl's appreciation of Jet's eyelashes as "darkly bold as a spider's legs" (*TTG* 114). Indeed, these are perfect examples of the primary negative symbolism of the spider as outlined by Gilbert Durand who focuses on "the classical interpretation according to which the spider 'represents the symbol of the sour-tempered mother who has succeeded in imprisoning her child in the links of her web.'"[429] More generally, Durand's discussion outlines "the negative symbolism of the spider, the exemplary and voracious spinster who represents all of the terrifying mysteries of woman, animal and attachment."[430]

Similar negative connotations are associated with all of the major mother figures in *The Falls*. If I can be permitted an extravagant sort of amalgamation, the two dominant female characters, Ariah Littrell/Erskine/Burnaby and Nina Olshaker, are known, in their alternate mythological manifestations, respectively as the "Widow-Bride" and the "Woman in Black." Combining and re-ordering two aspects of these two "nicknames" can lead to "Black Widow," an image which evokes the power of their metaphorical webs to ensnare and manipulate those around them. The black widow is not only a highly venomous spider, she is

[429] My translation of: "l'interprétation classique pour laquelle l'araignée 'représente le symbole de la mère revêche qui a réussi à emprisonner l'enfant dans les mailles de son réseau.'" Otto Rank, quoted by Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 1992) 116.
[430] My translation of: "le symbolisme négatif de l'araignée, fileuse exemplaire et dévorante, qui polarise en elle tous les mystères redoutables de la femme, de l'animal et des liens." Durand 362.

one who also occasionally eats her mate after copulation, a cannibalistic characteristic which renders her all the more terrifying. Claudine Burnaby is another spider-woman who is specifically described upon several occasions as "a beautiful exotic spider" (*TF* 90) or a "velvety black spider" (*TF* 92, 379); her power over her son is evident in Dirk's reflection that "he was a sexually empowered adult man and yet something of a eunuch, a puppet-eunuch of his mother's" (*TF* 98).

However, ambiguity is created by the fact that these strands *can* be broken. Dirk Burnaby eventually distances himself from his mother and marries the woman of his choosing. The Burnaby children eventually defy their mother and begin actively seeking information about their father's past. "The tie," writes Durand, "is the direct image of temporal 'attachment,' of the human condition as linked to the consciousness of time and the malediction of death."[431] Therefore, "this symbolism is purely negative: the tie represents the magical and harmful power of the spider and the octopus as well as of the deadly and magical woman."[432] However, whereas the ties evoked by Oates's use of cobweb imagery retain the negative connotations described by Durand, their fragility is also emphasized. When Bethie refers to her high school experience in the second part of *Rape: A Love Story*, she paradoxically casts cobwebs as both oppressive and fragile at once: "You lived through it. For years you would live through it and only when you graduated from Baltic Senior High and the cobwebby cohesiveness of *peers, classmates* dissolved with no more resistance than actual cobwebs would you escape it" (*RLS* 132).

The thematic ambiguity becomes even more problematic when it comes to considering Alma as an anthropomorphic spider. The image of Alma as voracious spinster gradually breaks down as the story unfolds until it becomes unclear whether she should be considered

[431] My translation of: "Le lien est l'image directe des 'attachements' temporels, de la condition humaine liée à la conscience du temps et à la malédiction de la mort." Durand, 117.
[432] My translation of: "Ce symbolisme est purement négatif: le lien c'est la puissance magique et néfaste de l'araignée, de la pieuvre et aussi de la femme fatale et magicienne." Durand, 118.

as the spider or as the prey caught in its web. After Alma and Siegl's revelatory conversation about his novel, Oates once again evokes the spider imagery associated with Alma:

> Alma placed the mutilated book on the edge of a table some feet from Seigl, as if not wanting to come any nearer to him. Her hands with their cobwebbed backs were trembling. Seigl observed in silence. He had not a word more to say on this sorry subject. (*TTG* 252)

Is the web evoked here one of her own making, trembling with the force of her own anger at thinking she has been deceived? Or is she trapped inside it, trembling with fear? Confounding the imagery even more is the passage wherein Alma philosophizes about the little creatures of which she is clearly not afraid. Spiders are harmless, she says: "It's said a person eats seven pecks of dirt a year, right? Or maybe it's seven spiders. Since spiders crawl around at night and people sleep with their mouths open. So, seven spiders or seven pecks of dirt, none of it kills you" (*TTG* 209).

Thus, the web is an appropriate dialectical image linking the two facets of Oates's fiction, a borderline image with a tenuous place on the shifting frontier between night-side and day-side realms. On the one hand it represents the mysterious interconnectivity of human relationships that have an elusive power to bind. On the other hand the tenuous nature of the web emphasizes the fragile nature of such ties, indeed, of identity in general as illustrated by the fact that Ariah is at times the aggressive, oppressive "spider"-mother, at times "sylph-like, floating" (*TF* 242).[433] Whether menacing or fragile, the web is an image that cannot be escaped. Indeed, in *Unholy Loves*, discussed at the beginning of the preceding section, it is used as a metaphor for language itself: "From birth onward we are surrounded by it . . . a

[433] Whereas the word "sylph" can describe "a slender woman or girl of light and graceful carriage," it can also refer to "an imaginary or elemental being inhabiting the air and being mortal but soulless." Def. 1-2, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981). Here, Oates clearly evokes the dual meaning of the word, reinforcing the mythical dimensions through her insistence later in the paragraph of the windyness of the evening: "there was a surprisingly rough, muscular wind in the trees. The perpetual wind off the Gorge!" (*TF* 242). At other times Ariah is described as ghost-like (*TF* 314).

cocoon of words . . . a living web of language. The world is filtered through it. There is no world except what is filtered through it. A living web."[434]

Claire Kahane reads Flannery O'Connor's "grotesque-Gothic" female characters as an integral component of her feminine narrative voice which both profoundly articulates women writers' "revolt against the cultural order and their sense of helplessness within it."[435] Oates's "spider" women may be read in a similar way as they at once emphasize the potential power of women and the fragile nature of their position in society. In this way, they serve as an apt illustration of the issue of identity-confusion which Oates so frequently explores.

[434] Cited by Daly, "Marriage" 282.
[435] Claire Kahane, "The Maternal Legacy: The Grotesque Tradition in Flannery O'Connor's Female Gothic," *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983) 256.

Chapter VII
Liminal States; Questions of Identity:
Caught Between Haunting Past and Unknowable Future

> My interest swings between a realism which is actually very exciting if you are writing about a dense realistic political social world. That's actually very engrossing and then the world that's more dream-like and surreal and you kind of go back and cross between the two.
>
> - Joyce Carol Oates[436]

Brenda Daly has written that "a favorite theme of Oates" is "not the mystery of plot, but the mystery of identity."[437] The textual analysis that has been the focus of the last two chapters seems to corroborate this statement. Identity, as a complete commensurable entity, remains elusive, dispersed behind textual strategies that enhance the fragmented nature of the characters' personalities. The question of identity is intimately linked to the existence of liminal realms such as dream-states which seem to afford the possibility of a glimpse into the unconscious realm. "What we dream of, that we are"[438] Oates has written in an article about the city of her childhood. Yet in another essay, she appears to associate dreaming with madness: "In Madison as in all new places before habitude dulls, or masks, strangeness, I realized how precarious our hold upon what we call *sanity* is. Daytime 'dreaming' easily displaces it."[439] If dreaming displaces sanity and we are what we dream, is Oates saying we are all mad?

In a 1979 article on Oates and Naturalism, Steven Barza commented: "Fictional taste has moved to the elliptical, the mysterious, the willfully invented. Social criticism has given way to metaphysical challenge, earnestness to irony. Life is not unjust; it is preposterous,

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[436] Araújo, "Oates Reread" 101.
[437] Brenda Daly, "The Art of Democracy: Photography in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates/Rosamond Smith," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006): 467.
[438] Oates, "Oates Goes Home Again" 77.
[439] Oates, "Nighthawk" 60.

magical, absurd."[440] In Barza's article, this statement is offered both in contrast to the largely naturalistic style of Oates's early work which he considers to be a "throwback" to a period of highly valued tedious documentary evidence and in praise of her innovative structures that challenge the assumptions of Naturalism and anchor her fiction in its contemporary context.[441] However, in the context of her more recent fiction, Barza's statement seems markedly appropriate. Words such as "elliptical," "mysterious" and "metaphysical challenge" have proven their importance again and again over the course of this discussion. However, even in Oates's largely realistic fiction, a hint of the "magical" can sometimes be glimpsed, particularly concerning emphasis on emotional leanings and unconscious impulses. In this chapter I will examine the import of certain ghosts, visions and apparitions that appear within the "walls" of these realistic texts.

Barza, too, notes the amount of work the individual reader must do in creating the meaning of an Oates text: "The reader is, in fact, always inferring one thing or another. He must deduce, establish causative links himself, find the hidden twists in the path of the psyche. Ellipses, mysteries, riddles, here are the touchstones of contemporary art."[442] The "deviant response" is the concept Barza develops to illustrate the way in which the Naturalism of Oates's early texts challenges and contemporizes traditional Naturalism. Though critics are no longer tempted to refer to later Oates fiction as Naturalistic, the aberrant patterns identified by Barza which serve to break down the "extraordinary popular delusions" passed from one generation to the next are still present in her more recent fiction. The five categories he outlines are: 1) "numbed response" in which a character receives "a strong stimulus" and expects to feel emotion, "but none is forthcoming"; 2) "suppressed response" in which

[440] Steven Barza, "Joyce Carol Oates: Naturalism and the Aberrant Response," *Studies in American Fiction* 7.2 (Autumn 1979): 142.
[441] Barza ultimately recognizes that Oates's early naturalism is different than that which preceded her: "Oates is a contemporary voice. Her Naturalism is a Naturalism for her time. Individual destiny may be in the grip of larger forces, but the forces are unnamed, unknown, inscrutable" (142). Indeed, the point of his article is to discuss five different aberrant patterns that distance Oates's work from that of traditional Naturalists.
[442] Barza 146.

"emotion is deliberately suppressed"[443]; 3) "deferred response" in which the reaction is delayed[444]; 4) inappropriate response where "the response is both strong and immediate but completely different from what the stimulus warrants"[445]; and 5) irrational response in which "the response is strong, the stimulus negligible or entirely absent."[446] Instances of these can be identified in our corpus works. Gillian's revenge in *Beasts* is an example of a deferred response. Alma's hatred of Seigl in *The Tattooed Girl* constitutes both an inappropriate response and an excessive response. Such aberrant behavior patterns point to a fictional world inhabited by marginal characters perpetually operating on the edges of society, as if caught in a middle state between social reality and dream world.

As discussed in the first chapter, the family is one of the greatest sources of mystery with which Oates's characters are faced. It is also the system through which identity is formed, both genetically and through the formation of one's personality. Therefore, Oates's characters often have identity problems explicitly associated with mystery or loss of familial origins. The most obvious occurrence of this is in *The Falls* and has been discussed at length in Chapter One. Ariah's silence on the subject of her late husband, Dirk Burnaby, is a source of distress in her children's lives until they find the necessary courage to confront the situation of their own accord. However, familial confusion, suffering and/or hurt is also of prime importance in *The Tattooed Girl* and *Beasts*. Joshua Seigl of *The Tattooed Girl* harbors feelings of guilt about his family. On the one hand, his grandparents' fate in the concentration camps of WWII was the inspiration for the work of fiction that brought him fame (*TTG* 179). On the other hand, he feels guilty for not having been able to grieve much for his parents (*TTG* 108). Furthermore, Jet accuses him of destroying the memory of their family, their heritage, by not taking proper care of his health and his legacy (*TTG* 138). Emotionally charged family

[443] Barza 143.
[444] Barza 144.
[445] Barza 145.
[446] Barza 146.

situations have nothing to do with economic means in Oates's fiction. In terms of family relations, characters from all backgrounds are emotionally equal. Alma, too, is troubled by estrangement from her family, even though she was brought up in an economically depressed, abusive environment. Likewise, Gillian, the narrator of *Beasts*, has a difficult relationship with her parents. Unsure how to think about them, she claims to respect them, to feel sorry for them, but no longer to love them and seems incapable of imagining their existence outside their roles of mother and father (*B* 79-80). It is her inability to come to terms with her divorced parents, her father who "simply left" her mother (*B* 80), that pushes her in the direction of Andre Harrow and Dorcas. Even in *Rape: A Love Story*, where the connection is the least evident, pain at the loss of a husband and father is at the origin of Teena's decision to walk through the park, thus putting herself and her daughter in harm's way.

The fragmented way in which Oates depicts her characters' existences and the singling out of the family as the first source of mystery call to mind certain contemporary theories of psychoanalysis and psychology such as Marc Guillaume and Jean Baudrillard's notion of *spectralité*, and the concept of borderline personality disorder as outlined by Judith Feher-Gurewich.[447] This chapter will therefore examine these problematic identity issues in relation to the corpus works and discuss further techniques employed by the author to depict them such as the portrayal of dreams, visions and the use of the fantastic mode.

2.7.1. Spectrality

Baudrillard and Guillaume's chapter entitled "La spectralité comme élision de l'autre" (Spectrality as elision of the other) is a discussion of what Guillaume refers to as the ellipse of the other and has to do with the way in which we approach and understand otherness, a task

[447] Judith Feher-Gurewich, "Avant-propos . . . après-coup: Le sujet américain et sa psychanalyse" and "Les nouveaux désordres de l'inconscient," *Lacan avec la psychanalyse américaine*, Eds. Judith Feher-Gurewich and Michel Tort (Paris: Denoël, 1996) 9-25, 29-34.

which always runs the risk of oversimplification. "Reducing the other to other people is a temptation rendered all the more difficult to avoid in that absolute otherness is unthinkable and therefore destined to reduction," writes Guillaume at the beginning of the chapter.[448] Perhaps one of the reasons that Oates's books continue to shock, surprise and generally make readers uncomfortable is that they provide almost constant examples of the fallacy of reducing our concept of the other to only one of its components. A discussion of Baudrillard and Guillaume's concept of spectrality will help illustrate how this concept of reduction can be applied to Oates's characters.

Guillaume uses Simmel's analysis of the stranger as background to introduce his concept of artificial strangeness. In his *Digression sur l'étranger* (1905), Simmel, explains Guillaume, analyzes the stranger as someone who is at once both close and distant (distant not in a geographical sense, rather in the sense of being on the other side of a cultural barrier). The stranger's social distance allows him to be an impartial judge and observer in conflict situations because they do not directly concern him: "Therefore, this distance allows him a certain proximity, allowing him to be called on to judge and, even more frequently, to occupy the position of confessor. One confides more easily in a stranger than in one's family and friends. It is therefore an especially unique relationship because the more distant is also the closest."[449] Guillaume observes that our contemporary urban societies have multiplied instances of what he calls "artificial strangeness," an operation that is performed through an elision of the other. Changing social sensibilities have thus lead to the generalisation of a new mode of being and communicating that he qualifies as spectral.[450] I will briefly outline his argument. Opposing the notions of traditional communication and mediatised, spectral

[448] My translation of: "Réduire l'autre à autrui est une tentation d'autant plus difficile à éviter que l'altérité absolue est impensable, donc elle est vouée à la réduction." Baudrillard and Guillaume 19.
[449] My translation of: "Donc, cette distance lui permet une proximité, lui permet d'être appelé dans une position d'arbitre et aussi, plus souvent même, dans une position de confesseur. On se confie plus volontiers à l'étranger qu'à ses proches. On est ainsi dans un rapport tout à fait singulier parce que le plus loin est aussi le plus près." Baudrillard and Guillaume 21.
[450] Baudrillard and Guillaume 23.

communication, Guillaume explains that the latter occurs when the actors can dispense with the traditionally requisite procedures of control and identification such as the establishment of a veritable identity.[451] Technological advancements in mediatised forms of communication have encouraged the recourse to anonymity in response to the daily challenge of reconciling the exterior, social world with the interior, intimate world: "It is the challenge of every individual to understand these two worlds, though this is an impossible task because these two worlds are incommensurable. They are not only far removed from each other, they are completely unrelated. This is a daily challenge that we have developed the habit of avoiding rather than facing."[452] To this end we have multiplied instances of "strangers" in our lives, enabling the illusion that the difficulties of life are being confronted, whereas in reality the subject is only being more and more dispersed. In other words, we elide the other through contemporary forms of communication that enable us to remain anonymously masked behind a technological screen, a computer for example. This is the situation Guillaume refers to as artificial strangeness, a situation characterized by spectral communication. Guillaume's concept of spectrality comprises both the meaning of ghost or spectre, the fading away of one's corporeal presence, and the meaning of spectrum of light, composed as it is of different dispersed components.[453] Thus, according to Guillaume, "to be spectral is to have several faces and to engage only one at a time in any given communicational interface."[454] The consequence in terms of identity is that "the attribution of a single identity is to a certain extent avoided and eventually moved aside."[455] "To summarize," writes Guillaume,

[451] Baudrillard and Guillaume 25.
[452] My translation of: "Articuler ces deux mondes, c'est le défi de tout individu, et c'est une tâche impossible puisque ces deux mondes sont incommensurables. Ils ne sont pas seulement loin l'un de l'autre, ils sont sans rapport. C'est un défi quotidien, qu'on a pris l'habitude d'esquiver ou de conjurer plutôt que l'affronter." Baudrillard and Guillaume 31.
[453] Baudrillard and Guillaume 33-34.
[454] My translation of: "Etre spectral, c'est être à plusieurs faces, et n'engager qu'une face dans l'interface communicationnelle." Baudrillard and Guillaume 34.
[455] My translation of: "Ainsi, l'assignation à une identité est en quelque sorte esquivée, progressivement écartée." Baudrillard and Guillaume 34.

"spectrality is neither the destruction nor the disappearance of the subject, rather it is its dispersal."[456]

The discussion so far has provided ample evidence of the dispersed nature of Oates's characters. For example, the multiple viewpoint technique has been shown to foreground the multiple faces each character presents to the world. However, even within each individual, there does not seem to be a unified personality. The terms night-side and day-side have been used to identify the ambiguity of identity associated with the opaque split that exists within the self. The spectral quality of the characters is emphasized in episodes such as the glass incident in *The Tattooed Girl* wherein characters engage in transgressive behavior that they claim neither to control nor comprehend. In the crushed glass incident, Alma's thinking self is described as subordinate to her bodily self; she watches her actions as if she were outside herself:

> Alma's thinking followed acts performed by her body. She surprised herself by uttering things she had not known she knew. Often she thought *I'm smarter than I think I am!* Often, her hands surprised her.
>
> She was watching her hands now. [...] Alma saw her hands slyly wrapping the dish towel around the water glass and she was her hands smash the glass, safely wrapped in the towel, against the sink. [...]
>
> Alma laughed aloud, nervously. What was this? (*TTG* 201-202)

In this way, instances of the uncanny[457] such as Alma's detached body experience show that the other is inside us as well as outside us. As Julia Kristeva points out, we are strangers to others, but also to ourselves.[458] If we cannot understand this, Oates's texts show, we are destined to remain dispersed, spectral and isolated.

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[456] Baudrillard and Guillaume, 36. My translation: "En résumé, la spectralité ce n'est pas la destruction du sujet, ni sa disparition, c'est sa dispersion."

[457] Freud's concept of the uncanny refers to the immanence of the strange in the familiar.

[458] Julia Kristeva, "L'unversalité ne serait-elle pas . . . notre propre étrangeté?," *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) 249-285.

2.7.2. Spectre and Hantise

One of the facets of the dispersed subject as manifested in Oates's fiction has to do with lingering enigmatic aspects of the past and the corresponding inability to project oneself satisfactorily into the future. In his "Théorie de la hantise," Jean-Jacques Lecercle defines *le spectre* in terms of its opposition to a related concept, *la hantise*. The *spectre* is a ghost, something from the past that haunts the subject in the present. The *hantise* is a much more difficult term to translate into English, even, it turns out, to conceptualize in French where the tendency is to use it in only a few specific expressions. The dictionary definition "obsessive fear" is unsatisfactory to Lecercle who understands *hantise* as a process rather than an object. *Spectre* and *hantise*[459] are thus opposed not only by their semantic definitions, but also by their opposite modes of existence, one is an object, the other a process:

> The *spectre* exists in space as well as in time which is normal given its status as object. The *hantise*, however, as is normal for a process, exists only in time. But the two do not share the same time periods. The *spectre* belongs to the past, whereas the *hantise* belongs to the future.[460]

When the present is intruded upon by either *spectre* or *hantise*, it is as if a fold in time has occurred. The standard chronological progression is no longer operative. As Marc Amfreville explains, "the past is no longer the past when it haunts us. It becomes the double of the present, sliding in to occupy the space between the cracks."[461] The process concerning the future works differently, however, it, too, alters chronological temporality by halting the progression altogether. By privileging the space of past memory, one can attempt to hide from the future. Thus, though the two are distinctly different phenomena, as Lecercle aptly

[459] Because of the difficulty inherent in translating the concepts outlined by Lecercle into English and the risk of altering the meaning that could come with so doing, I have decided to retain the French words for my discussion.
[460] My translation of: "Le spectre existe dans l'espace, autant que dans le temps, ce qui est normal si c'est un objet. Et la hantise, ce qui est normal pour un procès, n'existe que dans le temps. Mais ce temps n'est pas le même. Le temps du spectre est le passé, celui de la hantise l'avenir." Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Théorie de la hantise," *Tropismes* 14 "La Hantise" (2007): 7.
[461] My translation of: "le passé n'est plus passé dès lors qu'il nous hante. Il devient le double du présent, c'est dans ses interstices qu'il se glisse." Marc Amfreville, "La Hantise de l'absence," *Tropismes* 14 "La Hantise" (2007): 149.

illustrates, they often work together, creating a subject who is trapped in a confused present where past, present and future merge, obscuring the path that could lead to an effective resolution of the subject's trauma. Amfreville distinguishes between "reminiscence" and "trauma," explaining that the former is the activity of voluntary memory, whereas the latter is the space of memory that has been erased by the violence of an emotional shock.[462] However, there is a third domain of memory, the space of memory that has not been erased but that is called up involuntarily through present allusions to a subject's past. This third manifestation of memory is that of the *spectre*.

The story narrated by Gillian in *Beasts* is a flashback prompted by the unexpected sight of a familiar totem in the Louvre, a *spectre* that dislodges her temporal footing and psychologically plunges her into the past and the tale of the events that will eventually return to haunt her present. The three short pages that constitute the novella's opening frame contain textual clues that point to Gillian's loosening hold on the present, a process that the sight of the familiar object has set in motion. The shock sets Gillian reeling as if caught in the downward pull of a spinning vortex. She becomes confused, she has aural flashbacks, she loses physical control of her body, until finally her ability to process her present surroundings becomes completely impaired: "Blindly I walked along the Seine embankment" (*B* 2). The *spectre* completely overshadows the present which becomes "opaque" and "obscured" (*B* 2, 3), funneling Gillian to the bottom of the vortex which lets out in the winter of 1975/76.

In the present discussion of *spectre* and *hantise* the narrative that comprises Gillian's flashback does not in itself concern us. It is of interest only in the effect it has on her present. Once Gillian's story ends, we once again return to the framing narrative for the two pages that serve as a conclusion to the novella. The reader is rejoined with the Gillian of February 2001, "walking blindly along the Seine embankment" (*B* 137), with whom he had parted more than

[462] Amfreville, "La Hantise" 145.

a hundred pages previous. At first glance Gillian's adult life seems to be totally unaffected by her turbulent past experience. We learn that she "graduated from Catamount College, with honors, in 1977" (*B* 137) and has become professionally successful, occupying the position of "provost of a small, but distinguished, liberal arts college in suburban Philadelphia" (*B* 138). However, a closer look reveals clues that several aspects of her future are being restrained by weight from the past. A certain dread related to her Catamount experience with the Harrows both prevents her from growing out her hair and from engaging in any sort of traditional romantic relationship. "Since the age of twenty I'd kept my hair trimmed short, the nape of my neck free. I hated hair in my eyes, and I hated the feel of it, sticky in warm weather, like someone's fingers, on my neck" (*B* 137). Long hair recalls the distressing nature of intimate touch and has the capacity to burn indicating the dual nature of Gillian's *hantise* which can be associated with both intimacy and fire. A second clue, almost at the end of the text, emphasizes the intimacy problem. While Gillian stands on the embankment of the Seine, gazing at the Eiffel Tower, she is joined by Dominique. We learn that the two are in Paris together and that they are frequent, though inconsistent companions: "We often traveled together, though we lived apart" (*B* 138).

Gillian's *hantise* in *Beasts* is certainly very subtle. For Bethie of *Rape: A Love Story*, however, the effects of her past on her present and future are much more obvious. The final chapter of *Rape: A Love Story*, "Lonely," reveals that Bethie's story has also been a flashback, very similar in nature to Gillian's experience. Bethie's episode is sparked by the sight of "a young police officer in uniform" (*RLS* 153). She imagines, in the unexpected shock of the moment that this man is Dromoor, an occurrence which reveals she is still haunted by the *spectre* of her girlhood trauma. Contrary to Gillian whose narrative gives no reason to believe that her flashback is not a singular event, Bethie's "sighting" of Dromoor is presented as another occurrence of a repetitive haunting phenomenon. The chapter begins with the

sentence "From time to time you see him: Dromoor." And we learn that she has "seen" him in several different attitudes: "Climbing out of a police vehicle. Walking on the street. Once, in Central Park, on horseback riding with another officer" (*RLS* 153). Bethie's adult life is therefore frequently intruded upon by visions and memories from her past. Bethie's "time" has folded once, joining past and present; it folds again as the obsessive weight of the past keeps her from facing the future. Bethie's husband does not know about the traumatic events of her childhood and she has no intention of ever telling him: "*When will you tell him? Maybe never. For why tell him? He would not understand*" (*RLS* 153).

Bethie's *hantise* therefore has to do with her fear of her husband's response were he to learn the truth. She seems to be caught like a broken record that keeps skipping back and repeating a section over and over again, unable to get passed the damaged point and continue playing through a song. However, those close to her do not realize she is haunted: "Your husband is touching your arm. Sometimes he's annoyed by these sudden fugues of yours on the street, sometimes he's concerned. He never seems to see who, or what, has captivated your attention so that you stand transfixed, staring" (*RLS* 154). It is interesting that Oates uses the word "fugue" to characterize Bethie's state of trance. In his discussion of *hantise*, Amfreville insists on the importance of the fugue, especially its repetitive nature, as a structural metaphor for a text of *hantise*. He cites the first definition of "fugue" from a French dictionary, that which identifies it as a type of musical composition. As English and French share this definition of the word, let me cite the first definition given by *Webster's* dictionary: "a contrapuntal musical composition in which one or two melodic themes are repeated or imitated by the successively entering voices and developed in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts into a well-defined single structure."[463] For Amfreville, a text which has the fugue as its controlling structural metaphor exhibits "the continuous repetition of a central

[463] "Fugue," def. 1, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981).

theme while allowing for, even inviting, the possibility of multiple variations on it."[464] Repetition is the defining characteristic of the fugue; repetitive obsession is an inherent symptom of *hantise*. Fugue-like repetition is evoked in the final chapter by the textual clues that indicate the recurrent nature of Bethie's visions. The structure of Bethie's memory flashes is also fugue-like, especially the way in which the events of the attack are returned to repeatedly over the course of Part I. However, the repetitive nature of fugue as musical composition is only one component of Bethie's fugue in *Rape: A Love Story*. Bethie's case is to be understood as well in terms of an alternate definition of the word: "a pathological disturbance of consciousness during which the patient performs acts of which he appears to be conscious but of which on recovery he has no recollection."[465] Clearly Oates means to allude, through the use of the word "fugue," both to the repetitive nature of Bethie's haunting past, as well as to the disturbance to her present mental faculties it brings on. Bethie realizes these states are not "normal" and is embarrassed at being blatantly caught in one of them, as her reaction upon being questioned by her husband attests to: "And then, waking from the trance, you feel a wave of heat rising into your face as if you've been slapped. You stammer, 'Why – why do you ask?'" (*RLS* 154). Like Gillian, Bethie's haunted state has repercussions on her ability to be intimate. Though she has a husband, there is much that separates her from him, so much so that the final line of the novella has Bethie's husband addressing her, saying "'You looked so lonely, suddenly. As if you'd forgotten I'm here'" (*RLS* 154). In this way the multiple levels of meaning to the word "fugue" contribute to a more complete understanding of Bethie's mental state. Haunted by a past which continually calls her attention away from the present and impedes her progression towards the future, it is Bethie's very identity, we come to realize, that is both fragmented and dispersed.

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[464] My translation of: "l'inlassable reprise d'un thème central qui se décline sur le mode du ressassement tout en autorisant, en invitant même, la variation et l'écart." Amfreville, "Hantise" 146.
[465] "Fugue," def. 3, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981).

The short, more inherently concise nature of the novella form, halfway between short story and novel, means that the action the author is able to describe must be limited.[466] Oates does not have the space in *Beasts* or *Rape: A Love Story* to continue following her characters to see whether they are able to work through their problems and come to terms with the past. In *The Falls*, however, the length of the novel form allows a multi-generational look at the Burnaby family that provides space for the resolution of the younger generation's "phantoms." When we first meet up with Royall, for example, in Part III, he, too, like Gillian and Bethie, is unable to project himself into the future. The thought of getting married greatly disturbs him and he decides to call off his wedding, feeling a need to resolve certain issues about his past before he can envisage creating a future for himself and a family.

2.7.3. Borderline States[467]

As we have seen, the confusion of Oates's subjects is quite frequently associated with past family issues. Unresolved feelings upon the loss of a loved one or problematic understanding of identity due to lingering family secrets are almost always at the root of the characters' malaise. In addition to the "spectral" quality of characters mentally dispersed between past and present, these symptoms, which describe individuals permanently in the margins, call to mind the theory of borderline personality disorders put forward by some psychoanalysts in which family issues are blamed for the subject's mental distress. Judith Feher-Gurewich explains how the new psychic disorder – "borderline" – developed out of the theory of *self* psychology that came to prominence in the United States in the 1970s. A

[466] Oates has described the difference between the short story and the novel in the following way: "Novels are complex matters; the density of interest has to go up and down. Short stories, however, are generally based on one gradual upward swing toward a climax or 'epiphany' or moment of recognition. A good chapter in a novel should probably be based on the same rhythmic structure as a short story. The novel, of course, can be leisurely while the average short story must be economical." "Building Tension in the Short Story," *The Writer* 79.6 (June 1966): 11.
[467] "Borderline" is the English equivalent of the term that is rendered in French as "état-limite."

comparison of the terms "subject" and "self" makes clearer what exactly is meant by the two terms: "On the French side of the Atlantic it is the subject – understood as the subject of the unconscious – that defines the field of psychoanalysis, whereas on the other side of the ocean it is the *self* – perceived as a conglomerate of both conscious and unconscious – that dominates the different tendencies of contemporary American psychoanalysis."[468] In addition to the importance of both the conscious and the unconscious, another important basic concept of this self psychology is the notion that the self is created through the relationship that exists between the individual, the *self*, and society, the other. In the theory of self psychology, explains Feher-Gurewich, "the healthy *self* is an intersubjective structure molded by the loving gaze of the other. It is the recognition and the confirmation of the other which allows the subject's creative potential to blossom. [...] Modern alienation is simply the result of an emotionally deficient parental environment."[469]

Evidence of emotionally deficient parental environments can be found in each of our corpus works. By refusing to acknowledge even the former existence of Dirk Burnaby, Ariah of *The Falls*, thinking herself to be protecting her children, actually saddled them with the pain of an incomplete past. The father of Alma Busch, "the tattooed girl," beat his children and virtually nothing is said about her mother. Gillian of *Beasts* feels an emotional void upon receiving the news of her parents' separation and reflects that she never really knew either of them. Finally, the adult Bethie continues to be haunted by memories of her past, perhaps due to the fact that her psychically wounded mother could no longer offer her the recognition, confirmation and loving gaze required for her psychic development into a healthy *self*. Thus,

[468] My translation of: "du côté français de l'Atlantique c'est le sujet – entendu comme le sujet de l'inconscient – qui définit le champ de la psychanalyse, de l'autre côté ce serait plutôt le *self* – perçu comme un conglomérat complexe confondant conscient et inconscient – qui domine les différentes tendances de la psychanalyse américaine contemporaine." Feher-Gurewich 10.

[469] My translation of: "le *self* sain est une structure intersubjective qui a été façonnée par le regard aimant de l'autre. C'est la reconnaissance et la confirmation de l'autre qui permettra au potentiel créatif du sujet de s'épanouir. […] L'aliénation moderne n'est jamais que l'effet d'un environnement parental affectivement déficient." Feher-Gurewich 21-22.

the deficient family background identified with borderline patients is certainly present in each of the main characters.

As for the symptoms this deficient family background creates in the individual, Feher-Gurewich explains: "This tragic being is far from professionally incompetent or socially inept. [...] But behind his normal or sometimes very sophisticated exterior, the 'borderline' patient suffers from uncontrollable rage, feelings of emptiness, lack of self-esteem and is quite often incapable of creating lasting emotional relationships."[470] All of these symptoms are connected to the unstable self-image of the borderline personality: "The analysis of 'borderline' patients reveals a childhood marked by a lack of gratifying responses and the paucity of useful ideals. Their aspirations and needs were ignored by a parental gaze which was indifferent or even cruel. As a result, they are incapable of interiorizing a sufficiently stable image of themselves that would allow them to make a commitment to their existence."[471] Once again this description corresponds well with the remarks that have been made about Oates's characters. Indifference, though unintentional, can be identified in the parental strategies of Ariah Burnaby, Teena Maguire and the parents of Gillian, and cruelty seems to have been an integral part of Delray Busch's parenting technique. Likewise, rage, low self-esteem and relationship problems are frequent troubles affecting the children.

The cure for borderline patients, explains Feher-Gurewich, lies in reestablishing the social ties that were broken by the individual's deficient upbringing. These social ties can only be restored "if the empathy the subject lacked during its formative years can be

[470] My translation of: "Cet être tragique est loin d'être professionnellement incompétent ou socialement inapte. […] Mais, sous ses dehors normaux et parfois très sophistiqués, le patient 'état-limite' souffre de rages incontrôlables, d'un vide intérieur, du manque d'estime de soi et il est le plus souvent incapable de créer des rapports affectifs durables." Feher-Gurewich 29-30.

[471] My translation of: "L'analyse des patients 'états-limites' révèle une enfance marquée par un manque de réponses gratifiantes et par la pénurie d'idéaux utilisables. Leurs aspirations et leurs besoins ont été ignorés par un regard parental indifférent ou même cruel. De ce fait, ils sont incapables d'intérioriser une image d'eux-mêmes suffisamment stable qui leur permette de s'engager dans l'existence." Feher-Gurewich 30.

restored."[472] Of our corpus works, it is only in *The Falls* that the characters are shown to fully work through their borderline states to restore empathetic social ties that allow them to engage in meaningful exchanges with others. This seems to also be the case with Alma and her relationship with Seigl. However, his death plunges her back into a state of dispersed emptiness which masks her ability to sense approaching danger and dulls her will to fight for her existence. As for Gillian and Bethie, the vivid nature of the flashbacks provoked by the sight of a familiar object from the past seems to indicate that the women still exist at the margins of past and present which has a visible effect on their emotional relationships. Thus, whether or not her characters are shown to complete the process of working through their emotional trauma to arrive at a new empathetic state of communication with others, Oates's fiction clearly identifies the family as a source of affective personality disorder in the individual and reveals, through the repetitive recurrence of the theme, the importance of borderline identity disorders in the author's aesthetic of the enigmatic.

2.7.4. "Phantoms"

Diane Long Hoeveler summarizes Nicolas Abraham's "notion of the 'phantom,' which he labels an 'invention of the living' designed to objectify 'the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one's life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts is not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.'"[473] Part III of *The Falls*, entitled "Family," opens with a short chapter, "Baltic," that describes the incomplete nature of the fatherless family living in the Baltic Street house and the atmosphere of mystery and concealment in which the children are

[472] My translation of: "Le lien social ne pourra se raffermir que si l'empathie qui a manqué au sujet pendant les années où il se constitue peut connaître un nouvel essor." Feher-Gurewich 21-22.
[473] Diane Long Hoeveler, "Postgothic Fiction: Joyce Carol Oates Turns the Screw on Henry James," *Studies in Short Fiction* 35.4 (Fall 1998): 366.

made to live by a mother whose eccentric behavior they are unable to understand. In fact, Ariah has gone so far as to attempt to occlude the fact of the man's very existence: "Never would Ariah speak of him. Never would Ariah allow us to ask about him. It was not that our unnamed father was dead [...] but there had been no father. Long before his death he'd been dead to us, by his own choice" (*TF* 278). Ariah is apparently too much of a narcissist to see the potential harm to her children of the "phantom" she has thus created. "Children are haunted," writes Hoeveler, "by the unresolved and secret sexual and psychic history of their parents in such a way that the children themselves come to embody the tombs that are enclosed within the psyches of their parents."[474] Abraham explains the process in more detail:

> The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious – for good reason. It passes – in a way yet to be determined – from the parent's unconscious into the child's. . . . *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other*. A surprising fact gradually emerges: the work of the phantom coincides in every respect with Freud's description of the death instinct . . . the phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression. Finally, it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization.[475]

Indeed, it is possible to identify aspects of the death instinct in each of the three Burnaby children: Royall is attracted to a cemetery where he conjures up an apparition, Chandler frequently puts himself in harm's way through his volunteer work, and Juliet hears voices urging her to join her father in death.

That Chandler has been deeply affected by the gaps in his past created as a result of his parents' troubled relationship is shown by the fact that his loyalties remain to his past relationships rather than to his present ones:

> He was scientifically-minded, and so he knew: he carried the genes of both his mother and father, equally. He owed his allegiance not to one but to two. Not one, but two contested in his soul.
>
> Yes the contest had always gone to Ariah. The other, the father, was dead, vanquished. The mother had survived and was supreme. And her opinion mattered so strangely much to Chandler, even now, in his adulthood; often, he

[474] Hoeveler 366.
[475] Abraham, cited by Hoeveler 367.

> felt under her spell, as if something were unresolved between them, unspoken. (*TF* 377)

It becomes obvious to Chandler's girlfriend, Melinda, that he is haunted by these unresolved issues from his past, that what she considers to be his unsafe behavior has something to do with his lost father. Breaking up with Chandler after he has put himself in harm's way during a crisis intervention incident, Melinda indignantly explains:

> "This has to do with your father, yes? But I don't give a damn about your father. I can't be involved with a man who doesn't care more about me, and my baby, and our life together, than he cares about a stranger, I can't be involved with a man who doesn't care if he lives or dies! Who'd toss his life like dice, as if it was worthless. Goodnight, Chandler. Goodbye." (*TF* 374)

Melinda is effectively identifying Chandler as suffering from a borderline disorder, a disorder that is compounded by the "phantom" of his father's past. Indeed, Chandler admits to being drawn to continue his volunteer work in crisis intervention despite both his mother's and his girlfriend's objections precisely because it affords him an opportunity to be incognito, "spectral," away from the complicated nature of his affective relationships:

> He had to admit he liked being anonymous. If he was Mr. Burnaby, the name wasn't *him*. Not here, not now. This was a kind of grace, for one who couldn't believe in God. Ariah wouldn't know where her son was, and couldn't be anxious/furious about him just yet. Royall couldn't know, and wouldn't be preparing to feel guilty/defensive if something happened to him. Juliet couldn't know, though if the incident was being covered on TV, and she happened to watch the evening news, she might guess that her elder brother was on the scene.
>
> And there was Melinda. (*TF* 353)

Therefore, both Chandler's thoughts and actions effectively reinforce his borderline position, even the "thank you for saving my life letter" he receives from Cynthia Carpenter which he saves as "a memento of this strange season in his life in which he was both a savior and a fool, revered and held in contempt, adored and despised in about equal measure" (*TF* 386).

Curiously, in spite of Chandler's reticence vis-à-vis certain of his affective relationships, it is the pain of the completely severed relationship with his brother that ultimately causes him to take his life in hand and attempt to understand the enigmatic nature

of his past: "There came a day in that season, an hour when Chandler's loneliness became so acute, he yearned to speak with Royall. Suddenly, for Chandler, there was no one but Royall. His heart was full to bursting" (*TF* 386). No other explanation is offered for Chandler's change of behavior than that his loneliness had finally reached the unbearable point. Once again, Oates emphasizes the enigmatic nature of the unconscious emotional side of humanity.

Juliet's attraction to death is the strongest of the three Burnaby siblings. This might be explained by the fact that as the youngest of the three, still only a baby when Dirk Burnaby disappeared, her personality was also the least formed when the traumatic loss of the father occurred, making her more susceptible to spectral dispersion. To accentuate this even further, Oates describes Juliet as having a shadow-self, as in these three examples:

1) "*A shadow-child* Ariah calls her. *Trailing a shadow-self*." (*TF* 419)
2) "Royall has seen. Juliet's *shadow-self*. / Most distinctive in slanted light. Close behind her, like a reflection of rippling water, an apparition that moves with the unconscious, slightly awkward grace of the girl herself." (*TF* 420)
3) "He [Royall] follows Juliet at a short distance, marveling that she hasn't glanced around, noticed him. [...] He sees, or believes he sees, the *shadow-Juliet* hovering beside her." (*TF* 421)

Indeed, Juliet's affective borderline split is so pronounced that her family members experience her personality as divided, part of it literally split off and trailing behind the other. Juliet's spectral nature is emphasized by the fact that from her earliest childhood, she has been hearing voices that others do not: "The voices! The voices in The Falls I heard when I was a little girl and Mommy pushed me in the stroller close to the edge where the cold spray wetted our faces" (*TF* 415). However, never does the reader wonder whether these voices might actually be a supernatural phenomenon. They are set up from the start as a compensatory device for parental loss, both the physical loss of her father and the perceived psychic loss of her mother's love:

> For Mommy ceased to love me when I was no longer a baby. [...] And Mommy didn't want to hear. [...] And I would crawl away to hide. And when they called me, I would not answer. The voices were whispers sometimes, I pressed my ear against the wall to hear, or against the windowpane, or the floorboards. Royall

> tried to hear, but could not. Royall said there was nothing, not to be afraid. (*TF* 416)

Among the voices she believes she hears is that of her father, calling her to join him in The Falls: "and among them his voice, she's convinced, the single voice among the others that's calm, gentle – *Juliet! It's time*" (*TF* 412). Yet the narrator lets slip the hint of a doubt at Juliet's conviction – "(Is that his voice? Juliet believes it is.)" (*TF* 412) – for how could Juliet, merely a baby at the time of her father's death, remember what his voice sounds like? In addition, mixed in with the taunting chant of the voices are allusions to the childhood teasing Juliet endured at the hands of both neighborhood children and classmates who jeered things such as "*Burn-a-by. Shame!*" (*TF* 419), suggesting they have knowledge of the past that Juliet herself does not. Thus, the voices Juliet hears on the June night she sneaks out to throw herself into The Falls whisper a confused message that can be read as an amalgamation of experiences related to Juliet's traumatic loss: "*Juliet! Juliet! Burn-a-by! Shame, shame's the name. You know your name. Come to your father in The Falls*" (*TF* 411). Unlike her brother Chandler, Juliet has no strong enough affective familial link to save her. She makes it all the way to the edge, "her young, ardent muscles tense to execute this feat" of hoisting herself over the railing, for "It's time!" (*TF* 444). Luckily for Juliet, however, someone has been watching over her. Stonecrop arrives in the split second before it is too late, forces her back from the embankment and endures her frantic blows to carry her to safety. I have saved the discussion of Royall for last because, contrary to the voices heard by Juliet, one does wonder whether the woman in black might not really be a supernatural apparition. This episode will be discussed in the next section as the manifestation of Royall's "phantom" has fantastic characteristics that Chandler's and Juliet's do not.

Christine Berthin's article "La hantise, le fantôme et la crypte" shows how instances of family secrets are at the root of the hauntings in classic gothic texts. She sees these texts as occupying a liminal realm that is the manifestation of a state of confusion and questioning, the

result of "instances of confusion of textual and subjective limits due to the interference of pieces of another story, the story of an other."[476] This is not simply any other, however, but an other with which the subject is intimately linked, an other from which the subject descends. Berthin's notion of haunting, therefore, is conceived of as a lack of transmission. Like Hoeveler, she uses Abraham and Torok's concept of the "phantom" to support her reading. I have already shown how family secrets are the source of "phantoms" for all of Oates's characters, particularly, though not exclusively, Ariah's children in *The Falls*. An analysis of the Burnaby children's hauntings in terms of Berthin's article will bring out the affinity of Oates's novel to classic gothic themes. Berthin develops a theory of "transgenerational haunting" (*la hantise transgénérationnelle*) that is at the core of the classic gothic text. This transgenerational haunting is composed of three key elements. First, the crimes of past generations weigh heavily on the present one: "Generational conflict drives the action," Berthin explains, "Parents exist only as obstacles to the happiness of the young generation."[477] Second, and closely related to the first, a secret from the family's past is transposed into a phantom haunting the present, the manifestation of knowledge that has been transmitted without ever being voiced. Abraham and Torok's theory explains how information can be passed from the unconscious of the parent to the unconscious of the child without ever having been voiced, resulting in the manifestation of a "phantom" that haunts the child. This "phantom" can take different forms though in gothic texts it usually takes that of the ghost. "In the Gothic," Berthin explains, "the secrets are always those of tainted blood. This secret takes the form of a ghost, an unconscious, unfamiliar manifestation that occupies

[476] My translation of: "Ce sont ces moments-là qui sont sans cesse mise en scène dans le gothique et le fantastique : moments de brouillage des limites textuelles et subjectives parasitées par les marques d'une autre histoire, de l'histoire d'un autre." Christine Berthin, "La hantise, le fantôme et la crypte," *Tropismes* 14 "La Hantise" (2007): 56-57.

[477] My translation of: "Le conflit des générations est bien sûr le moteur de l'action. Les pères n'existent que comme obstacles au bonheur de la jeune génération. Les crimes des générations précédentes pèsent de tout leur poids sur le présent." Berthin 58.

the subject's psyche."[478] Finally, the narrative structure involves a process of excavating the past. It is easy to identify these elements at work in *The Falls*. Oates insists heavily on the fact that Ariah's silence is at the root of her children's phantoms. Furthermore, this silence only exacerbates their anxiety at being associated with sordid events from the past that escape their understanding. The next section will look at how the woman in black can be read as the unconscious manifestation in Royall's mind of the mystery of his father's past that secretly haunts him. The woman in black is also the catalyst for the process of excavating the past that is at the heart of the third part of the novel.

Berthin insists on the fact that the phenomenon of haunting in gothic literature is the result of the subject's stasis in a liminal realm between past and future: "The question of haunting is the question of the subject: never contemporary with himself, he is occupied by the other, others. He is caught in the game of filiation and heritage. His present is always the past of another and his future has already happened. The ghosts of the gothic and the fantastic are nothing but the symptoms of the endless drifting of the subject who does not belong to himself. There is neither origin nor end to the subject."[479] As previously discussed, the same difficulty with establishing a stable self-image applies to the borderline cases outlined by Feher-Gurewich. Despite the lack of the visible gothic features of setting and frightening supernatural occurrences, the question of origins is no less haunting in Oates's text than in the gothic texts of which Berthin writes. The affinity of *The Falls* with Berthin's discussion of the gothic reinforces the relationship of the text to the notion of enigmatic origins and anchors it all the more in a liminal realm that constantly defies understanding. The element that remains

[478] My translation of: "Il n'y a jamais dans le gothique que des secrets de sang impur. Ce secret prend ici la forme d'un fantôme, formation inconsciente, étranger qui habite le psychisme du sujet." Berthin 58.
[479] My translation of: "La question de la hantise est la question du sujet : jamais contemporain de lui-même, il est habité par de l'autre, des autres. Il est pris dans le jeu des filiations et de l'héritage. Son présent est toujours le passé d'un autre et son avenir toujours advenu. Les fantômes du gothique et du fantastique ne sont que les symptômes de cette dérive infinie du sujet qui ne s'appartient pas. Il n'y a ni origine ni fin du sujet." Berthin 72.

to be discussed is the encounter between Royall and the woman in black, an episode whose interpretation seems crucial to the resolution of the enigmatic state of knowledge in the novel.

2.7.5. The Fantastic: A Borderline State

In Oates's realistic family saga, the reader is surprised to come across an actual ghostly apparition. Until page 286, the moment the woman in black appears to Royall in the cemetery, the evocation of the supernatural or the magical had always been associated with the realms of imagination, dreams, myths and emotions. Yet the woman in black actually seems as if she might be a spectral apparition. Indeed, her skin is described as "pallid, ghostly" (*TF* 288). How else could her incongruous, inexplicable appearance and knowledge of Royall and his family be explained? She seems to appear and disappear without leaving a trace and the only other person in the novel referred to as a woman in black is Nina Olshaker, the litigant in Dirk Burnaby's final lawsuit. The fact that the mysterious encounter takes place in a cemetery combined with the knowledge that later on in the novel no one is able to physically locate Nina Olshaker (*TF* 473) seems to invite us to think of the woman in black as Nina's apparition. Appropriately, the thought process that leads the reader to identify the woman to whom Royall makes love in the cemetery as the ghost of Nina Olshaker is a "ghost chapter" (*chapitre fantôme*) in Umberto Eco's sense of the term. Eco uses the phrase "ghost chapter" to refer to those parts of a temporal chronology that are missing from a text but that the reader infers and constructs for himself. Such "chapters," says Eco, are both postulated by the text and undermined by it at the same time as the reader is always forced to make false suppositions about the world of the story.[480]

[480] Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula ou la Coopération interprétative dans les textes narratifs* (Paris: Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1985) 273-289.

When this episode is read in the context of an oeuvre that is constantly dramatizing marginal states, the appearance of the woman in black in the cemetery seems almost logical. That is, it corresponds to a certain internal logic that favors hesitancy over assurances. Indeed, as Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out, "the fantastic represents an experience of limits."[481] Part III, Chapter 2 of *The Falls* opens upon Royall on the eve of his wedding. In this episode, he stops to explore the cemetery on Portage Road, meets a sensuous older woman "unknown to him" (*TF* 290) though she seems to know him – calling him "darling boy" and telling him she had known she would meet him there (*TF* 288) – and the two make love on the ground (*TF* 290). It is this encounter that prompts Royall to call off his impending nuptials and begin searching for information about his dead father.

Royall experiences the woman in black with all of his senses. During their encounter and brief tryst in the cemetery, it never occurs to him that she might not be real, though stricken with guilt at having betrayed his fiancée, after the encounter he tries to convince himself that this is so: "*God damn it could not have happened. Must've been a dream*" (*TF* 294). However, in spite of the desire to disbelieve the experience, Royall continues to think of the woman in black as a real person, even attributing his library research to her influence: "The woman in black had brought him here. He felt a stab of revulsion for her. Touching him as she had" (*TF* 332). Three weeks later, Royall returns to the cemetery on Portage Road, hoping to find a trace of his friend: "He spent some time searching the area where the woman in black had been trimming grass on a grave, but no grave looked as if it had been trimmed lately. [...] Nor could he find the hidden-away place where the woman had drawn him, and they'd lain together." Yet in spite of this unfruitful search, he still believes and holds on to the hope that "maybe the woman in black would return, Royall had so much to tell her" (*TF* 336).

[481] My translation of: "le fantastique représente une expérience des limites." Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1976) 99.

Royall's hesitation about the nature of the woman in black continues to hold at the novel's close. In the audience at his father's memorial service,

> Royall turns to scan the crowd for her: the woman in black. The woman he met, made love to, in the cemetery on Portage Road. Since that morning Royall has not seen her though he has seen women who resemble her, teasingly and fleetingly. He almost could believe the meeting, the intense lovemaking, had been a dream. A dream of that cemetery, and that time. Yet so real, he's sexually aroused, stirred to the point of pain recalling it. In public places like this he habitually looks for her though guessing, nearly a year after their meeting, that he won't ever find her. (*TF* 480)

The hesitant response of both character and reader alike as to the nature of the woman in black recalls Todorov's definition of the fantastic as residing in the moment of uncertainty:

> In a world identifiable as our world, the world we know, a world without devils, sylphs or vampires, an event occurs that cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The one witnessing the event must choose between one of two possible solutions: either he is faced with a sensory illusion, a product of the imagination and the laws of the world remain unchanged; or the event really took place and is an integral part of reality, in which case this reality is governed by laws that are unknown to us. [...]
>
> The fantastic occupies the moment of this uncertainty; once one or the other solution is chosen, the fantastic realm is left for another neighboring genre, the strange or the marvelous. The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by an individual who knows only the natural laws who is faced with an event of supernatural appearance.[482]

The woman in black episode can perhaps benefit from the clarification of intertextual clues as it is quite certainly a reference to one of the most well known pieces of fantastic fiction, namely, Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" which Todorov identifies as a remarkable example of a truly fantastic work of fiction because "the text does not allow us to decide whether the ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether they are the hallucinations of the

[482] My translation of: "Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons, sans diables, sylphides, ni vampires, se produit un événement qui ne peut s'expliquer par les lois de ce même monde familier. Celui qui perçoit l'événement doit opter pour l'une des deux solutions possibles: ou bien il s'agit d'une illusion des sens, d'un produit de l'imagination et les lois du monde restent alors ce qu'elles sont; ou bien l'événement a véritablement eu lieu, il est partie intégrante de la réalité, mais alors cette réalité est régie par des lois inconnues de nous. […] Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude; dès qu'on choisit l'une ou l'autre réponse, on quitte le fantastique pour entrer dans un genre voisin, l'étrange ou le merveilleux. Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel." Todorov, *Fantastique* 29.

governess, victim of the troubling environment in which she finds herself."[483] The fact that Oates has rewritten James's story upon two occasions[484] attests to her familiarity with the text. Thus, the fact that both the female apparition in James's text and in Oates's text are described as "a woman in black" seems no small coincidence. In "The Turn of the Screw," the governess describes Miss Jessel's ghost in these terms when she is relating the experience of the apparition to Mrs. Grose: "a figure of quite as [*sic*] unmistakable horror and evil: *a woman in black*, pale and dreadful – with such an air also, and such a face!" (my emphasis).[485] The link between the two fictional characters is thus created through the way in which their clothing is described; Oates's woman in black "wore layers of black clothing, down to her ankles" and had "untidy black hair" (*TF* 286). In addition, similar to James's governess's description of Miss Jessel's ghost, she has "papery-pale" skin and certain dreadful, in the sense of unpleasant or shocking, features: "her eyes were slightly sunken in their sockets" (*TF* 286) and she is standing barefoot in the cemetery (*TF* 287). However, finding himself in her presence, Royall does not feel that this is a figure of horror and evil. On the contrary, he is sexually excited and infused with "an overwhelming sensation of warmth, tenderness" (*TF* 288).

Oates's metafictional rewriting "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" allows us to reinforce the intertextual connection between James's and Oates's apparitions. Whereas James's first person narrative confines the reader to the governess's unique point of view, Oates's third person narrative attempts to restore Quint and Jessel's humanity. Through her

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[483] My translation of: "Un exemple remarquable est ici fourni par le roman de Henry James, *le Tour d'écrou*: le texte ne nous permettra pas de décider si des fantômes hantent la vieille propriété, ou s'il s'agit des hallucinations de l'institutrice, victime du climat inquiétant qui l'entoure." Todorov, *Fantastique* 48-49.

[484] "The Turn of the Screw" in *Marriages and Infidelities* and "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*. A recent article for the *Herald Scotland* contains the following anecdote, in an interview with Jackie McGlone, Oates claimed "that the literary character she most resembles is the governess in Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw' – 'wildly inventive and imaginative, but where is the 'reality' to which she aspires?'" "Stepping out of the darkness," *Herald Scotland* (12 July 2010).

[485] Henry James, "The Turn of the Screw," *Ghost Stories of Henry James* (Ware, England: Wordsworth Classics, 2001) 206. I am indebted to Diane Long Hoeveler for citing this passage in her article and thus allowing me to make the connection between "The Turn of the Screw" and *The Falls*.

marvelous narrative (Quint and Jessel are ghouls whose existence in the world of the text goes unquestioned), she creates a space for the exploration of the ghosts' point of view of the situation. Diane Long Hoeveler explains:

> The postmodern morality of Oates positions both the living and the dead as victims. Her ideology goes something like this: in James's moral universe, the unnamed governess needed to believe that those who had died were "Evil" so she created its manifestations in order to convince herself that she inhabited a wholly different world, the world of the living that was by its very nature "Good." A tremendous anxiety toward death actually motivates James's text, as well as an almost pathological fear of sex in any of its forms. Oates makes plain the forces driving James's text; at the same time she puts forward her own alternative view of morality – there is no sharp demarcation between "good" and "evil." They exist, if they exist at all, on a continuum where we will all at some time in our lives find ourselves. Oates does not mystify nor does she coddle her readers. She slaps them in the face with the realization that at some point all of us will be prey to obsession, to an erotic mania and nostalgia that is so intense and irrational in its object-choice that [we] will wish ourselves dead.[486]

Oates's rewriting of the story thus makes the sexual connection between the children and their adult caretakers explicit. Herein lies two more links between *The Falls* and the Oatesian fictional world of Bly. First, the ghosts are not vilified in either story, rather their humanity is accentuated. Second, Oates's woman in black of *The Falls*, like her Jessel, seduces a "child" as a replacement for the man/father she cannot have. One of the first things the woman in black says to Royall, just before kissing him for the first time, indicates that the son reminds her of the father: "She whispered, 'I do know you. Yes. You're his son. Oh, this is so – such a miracle'" (*TF* 288). Furthermore, Royall can sense he is not the real object of the woman's affections, but only a vessel through which she can connect with a memory:

> More tenderly than anyone had ever touched Royall Burnaby, the woman in black had touched him. *We know each other don't we?* More tenderly than anyone had ever kissed Royall, the woman in black had kissed him. *Your eyes. His eyes*. He had not dared to ask the woman in black whose eyes she meant. Somehow, Royall knew. (*TF* 295)

[486] Hoeveler 369-370.

Thus, we can establish a sliding chain of meaning around the theme of ghosts and their sexual encounters with the living from 1) James's text to 2) Oates's rewriting of James's text to 3) Oates's intertextual references to both the original text and her rewriting of it in *The Falls*. The link to James's story hints at the possibility of a parallel between two fantastic texts. The similarities between the passage from *The Falls* and the rewriting reinforce the notion that Oates is a writer bent on reinforcing the humanity of each of her characters, no matter how marginal. As the following discussion will show, the woman in black episode from *The Falls* is no less fantastic than James's story. If anything, Oates's text reinforces the notion of mystery surrounding the nature of her characters' experiences. Royall, for example, at the novel's close, is described as having become more in tune with the mysteriousness of the world that surrounds him: "Earth, water, rock. A mysterious *livingness* to these, that seem to superficial eyes inanimate. One morning Royall woke to the excited realization that he would study these phenomena; that he preferred them to the world of mankind" (*TF* 480).

In his discussion of the themes related to the fantastic, Todorov observes an effacement of the limits between matter and spirit, between the exterior realm of objects and the inner space of the mind, pointing out that there is "a correspondence between these fantastic themes on the one hand, and, on the other, the categories used to describe the worlds of the drug addict, the psychotic, or the very young child."[487] In terms of both the discussion of borderline disorders and Abraham and Torok's concept of the "phantom," it is interesting to note that Nina Olshaker (the woman in black) had already been compared to a phantom in Part II of *The Falls* when Dirk considers his wife to be conjuring up ghosts, imagining things that are not real: "Of course, Dirk could return home whenever he wished. If he could bear it. For Ariah had given him up. Given him over, in her heart, to the other woman. / Though the *other woman* was a phantom of Ariah's own contriving" (*TF* 251). This "other" woman had

[487] My translation of: "une correspondance entre les thèmes fantastiques groupés ici, d'une part, et, d'autre part, les catégories dont il faut user pour décrire le monde du drogué, du psychotique, ou celui du jeune enfant." Todorov, *Fantastique* 126.

such an effect on Ariah and Dirk's life it seems normal she would have an effect as well on the lives of their children. Nina Olshaker did exist, however the image of her as woman in black and temptress/adulteress is sheer imagination. It is the combination of Dirk's and Ariah's mental images of the woman that are passed on to Royall and become his phantom, his woman in black, explaining why "she did look familiar to him, somehow" (*TF* 287) even though he had never seen her before and his parents had never spoken of her to him.

Such a psychoanalytical reading would seem to point to an ultimate understanding of the episode as one of "fantastic-strange," placing the experience of the woman in black in the realm of dreams. Indeed, we read that Royall has always been particularly susceptible to dreams: "Since infancy he'd slept with unusual intensity, and often woke in a state of dazed distraction, exhausted from sleep, in thrall to whatever had happened to him in sleep which he could only dimly recall in consciousness" (*TF* 290). Furthermore, he had a childhood propensity for believing in ghosts, coming home to report excitedly and credulously on ghost stories picked up at Baltic Street Elementary, even reporting "wide-eyed" one day that the ghost of whom he had been previously speaking was "real" and lived on their street (*TF* 308-309), an incident which Royall remembers ten years later in the midst of meeting the woman in black and deciding to break off his wedding plans (*TF* 311). In addition, Royall's adventure has parallels with his sister's experiences with the voices – "The roaring in Royall's ears grew louder. He was being drawn into the churning depths of the Gorge" (*TF* 289) – and his brother's experience of tunnel vision – "No turning back. No direction except forward. The world had shrunk to the approximate size of a grave, and there was no direction except forward" (*TF* 290). Chandler's anecdote in a later chapter about "swimmers" in the river can also offer an explanation for Royall's experience with the woman in black. From all of his work as an emergency volunteer, Chandler has learned that witnesses cannot always trust their eyes: "Witnesses will swear – sincerely, adamantly, at time vehemently! – that they have

seen a swimmer where (in fact) they've seen a corpse, born rapidly downstream by a current strong and turbulent as that of the Niagara River" (*TF* 339). This can be explained by the fact that "people want to see a 'swimmer.' Definitely they don't want to see a corpse. Out there, in the river, someone like themselves, they're going to want to see that he's alive, and swimming. Whatever their brains might tell them, their eyes don't *see*" (*TF* 340). Thus, Royall may have "seen" the woman in black in the cemetery because that is what he needed to conjure up at that moment in order to get on with what he had to do, namely breaking off his engagement and inquiring about his father.

However, other elements of the woman in black episode seem to point to a "fantastic-marvelous" resolution as the only possibility. Royall, we read, did not have the imagination to conjure up such a vision for himself: "As in a dream of a kind Royall would not have had the imagination to summon for himself this woman whose name was unknown to him opened the loose top of her dress in a gesture that pierced him like a knifeblade" (*TF* 289). What is more, though Royall falls asleep in the cemetery and his brain is "dazed, obliterated" when he comes to consciousness, the woman is still there (*TF* 290). Given Oates's poetics of the undefinable and the elusive, the fantastic mode is a particularly appropriate tool for presenting the reader with yet another experience of unreadability as its task, writes Denis Mellier, is "to call into question shared beliefs and the conventionally agreed upon limits of the real."[488] Ultimately, choosing between interpretations of the woman in black as real or imaginary is unnecessary because in either case she represents the same thing, that is the same troubling intrusion of the past in Royall's present. Her psychological reality is therefore unquestionable.

[488] Denis Mellier, *La littérature fantastique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000) 17.

2.7.6. Shadows

In the story "Ghost Town," the writer protagonist struggles to face the challenges posed by the present of his life. Oates writes: "The ghost-figures of his imagination hovered in the dark corners of the room, watching. He could sense their pity."[489] The recourse to ghosts and shadows is a frequent motif employed by Oates to characterize a protagonist's struggles to reconcile the various temporal phases of his life: past, present, future. The motif recalls Part IV of *The Tattooed Girl* entitled "The Shadows" and the "shadow-figures" that inhabit it. When Alma is being interviewed by two police detectives she is shocked to hear them ask her whether or not she boasted before witnesses of planning to kill her employer, so much so that she begins to have trouble both thinking and breathing:

> The name *Busch* was being enunciated. *Busch Busch Alma Busch*. The cassette in the tape recorder turned. There were more than two shadow-figures in the room, she saw now that there were others. All were watching her closely, ardently. (*TTG* 298)

Alma's shadow-figures seem to represent revenants from her past that are making trouble for her in the present: "Her former lover had betrayed her. Some of the other guys. His friends. Maybe someone had been arrested, he'd informed on her to make a deal" (*TTG* 298). A shadow-figure is therefore a figure intruding on a temporal moment that is not his own. In this way, Alma, though still living, has herself become a shadow-figure in the wake of Seigl's death, inhabiting the world in a death-in-life state as attested to by her reversion to a state of being reduced to biological mechanisms: "She slept, she ate. The cycle persisted. Never would it cease until she herself ceased" (*TTG* 303). Furthermore, the narrator describes Alma's state in a way she herself cannot: "*It* was Alma's word. Not *his death* but only just *it*. For she could not have acknowledged *his death, and the end of my life*" (*TTG* 302). A few pages later, Alma perceives yet another shadow-figure, a figure that she initially imagines to be Seigl himself returning to her but that instead turns out to be another vengeful revenant:

[489] Oates, "Ghost Town" 609.

> Almost, she could hear his voice now. She could hear him in the front hall. A subtle vibration of the floorboards, his footsteps approaching her.
>
> She smiled. Hastily she set aside whatever she'd been eating [...] on a counter, and she left the kitchen, forcing herself to remain calm, she was making her way barefoot through the brightly lighted yet so strangely empty dining room, and the hall, and she would have entered Seigl's brightly lighted study which was his special place, and had become her special place, except a shadow-figure of about Alma's height moved swiftly at her. So fast!
>
> Before Alma could draw breath to scream, the knife blade was flashing. (*TTG* 305)

The difference with this vengeful revenant is that it is actually present in bodily form and represents a literalization of the "living in the shadow of death" metaphor that runs through the narrative.

Parallel to the thriller crime narrative of *The Tattooed Girl* is another narrative, the narrative of a *hantise*. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out, one of the most common French expressions to make use of the term, *vivre dans la hantise de la mort*, can be rendered in English as "living in the shadow of death."[490] *La hantise*, an emotion linked to feelings of anguish and suspense about the future, introduces death into life. The post-Seigl Alma of Part IV is effectively eclipsed by the shadow of death that has been cast over her like a shroud, making her surrender almost inevitable. However, she is not the only character to be so affected by a *hantise*. Indeed, Seigl is portrayed in the shadow of death from the novel's opening lines which already indicate a negative change in his physical capacities: "He meant, but could not bring himself to acknowledge, *I can't live alone any longer*" (*TTG* 3). In fact, Seigl is already inhabited by death through his body's infection by neurodegenerative disease. Whether or not Alma succeeds in killing him almost seems trivial. The shadow of death not only concerns Seigl's future fate; the confused impressions of Seigl's failing state of health – he cannot always control his thoughts and actions – find a parallel in Seigl's past, notably the deaths of his ancestors in the concentration camps that he attempted to render in a novel appropriately titled "*The Shadows*": "In *The Shadows* he'd evoked elliptically the confused

[490] Lecercle 17.

impressions of his Seigl and Schiff relatives transported to the Nazi death camp a quarter-century before he was born" (*TTG* 55). Later in Oates's novel, the illness and the act of examining the past are explicitly linked by side-by-side juxtaposition:

> Were Seigl's eyelids closing? His brain shutting down like a faulty generator? / In *The Shadows* he'd dared to follow his grandparents Moses and Rachel Seigl into the gas chamber at Dachau, and by slow and then rapid degrees into death as their terrified brains, battling extinction, snatched at memories. (*TTG* 179)

Thus, Oates's shadow-figures represent characters in the throes of identity crisis, struggling with phantoms of the past and/or shadows cast by the future which make them incapable of coming to terms with the present and thus condemn them to a liminal state of only partially-present shadow-like existence.

The stylistic strategies that have been the subject of this part are perhaps the element of Oates's writing that remains the most controversial. Time and again reviewers praise Oates for her dedicated treatment of contemporary themes while deploring certain aspects of the way she does so. For example, in a 2010 review of *Little Bird of Heaven*, Sarah Churchwell is critical of Oates's insistent, repetitive style: "The italics and repetitions may be symptomatic of Krista's obsession, but they still overwhelm the prose."[491] However, it is difficult to share this critical stance after closely examining the volume of emotion and information that is conveyed by these authorial strategies. "I've never thought of writing as the mere arrangement of words on the page," writes Oates, "but as the attempted embodiment of a vision: a complex of emotions, raw experience."[492] This desire to uncover certain emotional truths has lead some to compare Oates's authorial role to that of detective. To the extent that

[491] Sarah Churchwell, "Little Bird of Heaven and A Fair Maiden by Joyce Carol Oates," *The Guardian* (30 January 2010).
[492] Joyce Carol Oates, "To Invigorate Literary Mind, Start Moving Literary Feet," *The New York Times* (18 July 1999).

Oates sees and hears everything concerning the most secret realms of her characters lives, one French reviewer has referred to her as a "Miss Marple of hearts."[493]

H. P. Lovecraft, in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, retains the highest praise for those weird stories that do not suffer the defect of explaining away the mystery.[494] Oates, too, places great importance on retaining the mystery of experience. Thus, her fiction continues to evoke an incommensurable realm that holds the inaccessible secret to the mysteries of interconnectivity. Oates also shares Lovecraft's interest in "realism in terms of human psychology and emotion."[495] Fantasy interested him because he considered it to be "an art based on the imaginative life of the human mind, *frankly recognized as such*; and in its way as natural and scientific – as truly related to natural (even if uncommon and delicate) psychological processes as the starkest of photographic realism."[496] By focusing her attention as much, if not more, on her characters' inner states than on their exterior social selves, Oates creates a cast of spectral, borderline personalities whose essences appear as ephemeral to themselves and each other as they do to the reader of the stories.

In *Beasts*, Andre Harrow says to Gillian: "'Yours is the art of indirection and ellipsis, Gillian. Yours is the art that can grow'" (*B* 79). In this instance, Andre Harrow seems to be the figure of the author who has dedicated herself, as the discussion in this part has made clear, to the creation of an elliptical fiction whose indirect nature allows it to expand beyond the page. This, therefore, is the complicated background against which Oates's detective plots are set. A fiction that is forever striving to expand to embrace the possibility of multiple meanings

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[493] "The author of *Bellefleur* is a true snoop, a Miss Marple of hearts; she sees everything, infers everything, guesses everything. She is able to get behind appearances to flush out the best kept secrets, the sticky dregs of the unsaid and the hypocrisy that are the addiction of a family that is not as magical as it seems." My translation of: "L'auteur de *Bellefleur* est une véritable fouine, une miss Marple des cœurs ; elle voit tout, devine tout, entend tout. Et finit par déchirer le rideau des apparences, pour débusquer les secrets les mieux gardés, toute cette lie poisseuse de non-dits et d'hypocrisies dont s'abreuve une famille pas si féerique que ça." André Clavel, "La sentinelle de l'Amérique," *L'Express* (9 April 2009): 108.
[494] Howard Philips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973).
[495] Joyce Carol Oates, "H. P. Lovecraft: An Introduction," *Tales of H. P. Lovecraft* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007) xiv.
[496] Lovecraft, cited by Oates, "H. P. Lovecraft" xiv.

and ways of being seems like it can only be in constant conflict with the aims of detective fiction which seeks to find the one true explanation behind an event rather than an endless array of possibilities. One might expect the concrete nature of detective fiction to serve as a counterweight to the impulse towards mystery and open-endedness in Oates's fiction outlined in the first two parts of this study. The purpose of the next and final part is to examine to what extent this is the case.

PART THREE
THE MYSTERIES OF PLOT

Joyce Carol Oates has been referred to as the "dark lady of American letters." The epithet "dark" applies not only to her themes, which the first two parts of this study have shown to be anchored in the puzzling and mystifying aspects of human experience, but also to the author herself. Her dark hair and eyes are intriguing elements of photographs that seem to capture the author's fragility and ephemerality. From "dark," a short chain of associations leads us to "enigma": from "dark" to "obscurity" to "hidden" meaning to "enigma." Enigma, in its strictest sense, as Jean Bessière points out, refers to a sort of word game or puzzle.[497] The variant "enigmaticity" refers to the "play" of language, our attempts to communicate sense through words, and the relationship of signifier to signified. Whereas "enigma" is concrete and definable, "enigmaticity" is a more elusive characteristic of a relationship between things. I have been working my way down through the various levels of Oates's texts, beginning with the most abstract elements in the discussion of her themes in Part I, and drilling down to increasingly concrete elements in the examination of syntactic techniques in Part II. This study has shown just how appropriate Bessière's term "enigmaticity" is as a general paradigm for Oates's fictional world. One element of the texts remains to be explored, namely the most concrete element: the enigma or mystery which the text purports to elucidate. In literature, a whole genre (or rather, as we shall see, a sub-type of a genre) has been created around the notion of solving a puzzle, elucidating a mystery, answering a riddle, decoding an enigma. A discussion of this literary form and its related forms comprises the final part of this study which attempts to ascertain to what extent Oates's texts can be considered detective fiction and whether the preoccupation, in her fictional world, with the mysteries of life has a parodic effect on her rendering of crime stories in fiction.

[497] Jean Bessière, *Enigmaticité de la littérature: Pour une anatomie de la fiction au XXe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993).

In the introduction to his *Le polar américain, la modernité et le mal* (The American Thriller, Modernity and Evil), Benoît Tadié announces his goal of elevating the thriller[498] to its proper place in the realm of "serious" literature.[499] He considers the thriller to have been born in 1920s America, in reaction to the classic English detective story model which was no longer socially pertinent. He therefore analyzes the one as marking a rupture with the other.[500] Tadié emphasizes the differences between classic detective fiction and the thriller, differentiating the two to a greater extent than other critics such as Jerry Palmer and Julian Symons whose theories will be discussed later on. This discrepancy between French and American conceptions of the thriller is explained by Tadié's brief discussion of theoretical problems and critical schools of the genre. Though the form was invented in the United States in the 1920s, and quickly became extremely popular, its status among critics of fiction remained hazy. The emergence of Marcel Duhamel's "Série Noire" in post-WWII France marked the beginnings of its consideration as a separate genre, a point of view that was exported across the Atlantic.[501] Tadié explains the emergence of a theory of detective fiction first in France rather than in the United States as due to the fact that whereas the status of detective and crime stories in the United States was unclear, in France classic detective fiction and thrillers were clearly separated from the start. "Série Noire" published thrillers and "Le Masque" published classic detective fiction:

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[498] The problem of terminology surrounding the domain of detective fiction will be discussed further on. Tadié uses the French word "polar." For the time being, suffice it to point out that Tadié's "polar" encompasses both Todorov's "thriller" and "suspense novel." In an article which appeared the year following his book, Tadié uses the expression "roman noir" interchangeably with "polar." See Benoît Tadié, "L'univers matériel du polar," *L'empreinte des choses*, eds. Marie-Christine Lemardeley and André Topia (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2007) 147-159. On page 40 of his book, he uses the expression "roman hard-boiled" (hard-boiled novel).

[499] Benoît Tadié, *Le polar américain, la modernité et le mal (1920-1960)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006) 3.

[500] Tadié, *Polar américain* 4.

[501] Tadié, *Polar américain* 11. In a short summary of the history of the collection on the Gallimard Editions website, Philippe Blanchet explains that the "Série Noire" was launched in 1945 with the publication of two novels by Peter Cheyney, translated from English by Marcel Duhamel. In the first three years, only six works were published. However, the collection proved to be a big success, the French became avid consumers of this exciting new form of hard-boiled literature from across the Atlantic. In 1948, Marcel Duhamel became editor of the series which represented a true "literary revolution" and began publishing at a more rapid pace. In this same year, the first original French thriller was published. "L'oeuvre au noir," *Editions Gallimard website*, 22 July 2010 <http:// www.gallimard.fr/catalog/html/event/index/index_serienoire.html>.

> This can perhaps explain why French criticism was faster than Anglo-American criticism to accept the binary division between the thriller and the classic detective story and to develop theories about the relationship of the two: Todorov's theory of narratology considers that the thriller substitutes the forward movement of the adventure for the backward-looking structure of the investigation in the classic detective story; Jean-Patrick Manchette, the most effective of French theorists, developed an ideological theory which identifies each of the two crime fiction types with a specific historical moment.[502]

In a footnote, Tadié indicates that the perception of the genre in the United States still remains hazy, as opposed to France where this taxonomy is widely accepted.[503]

One might wonder at the relevance of discussing Oates's work in terms of detective fiction. The "golden age" of classic detective fiction is generally identified as the 1920s and Tadié establishes the forty-year period from 1920 to 1960 as the "golden age" of the thriller.[504] Indeed, these types of fiction are frequently analyzed in terms of their close relationship to their historical contexts. "The classic detective story of the type written by Conan Doyle," writes Tadié

> spoke to the middle classes of the nineteenth century to dispel the anxiety produced by the turbulence of the industrial revolution and worker disputes. The thriller speaks to the alienated twentieth century man, examining the conditions of his existence in an urban environment that is both fascinating and worrisome. Classic detective fiction is backward-looking; the thriller is modern: under cover of creating a diversion for the reader, it actually puts him face to face with his history, without offering any escape from the problems of the present.[505]

The discussion of detective fiction in relation to Oates in this study clearly places her in the post-classic detective fiction and post-thriller periods and seeks to analyze the extent to which

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[502] My translation of: "Cela explique peut-être pourquoi la critique française a, plus vite que la critique anglo-américaine, accepté la division binaire entre polar et roman à énigme et théorisé leur articulation: articulation narratologique chez Todorov, pour lequel le polar substitue la 'prospection' de l'aventure à la 'rétrospection' de l'enquête dans le roman à énigme; articulation idéologique chez Jean-Patrick Manchette, le plus percutant des théoriciens français, qui replie les deux types de littérature policière sur deux moment historiques." Tadié, *Polar américain* 11-12.

[503] Tadié, *Polar américain* 12.

[504] Tadié, *Polar américain* 23.

[505] My translation of: "Le roman à énigme à la Conan Doyle parlait à la bourgeoisie du XIXe siècle, pour dissiper son angoisse dans un monde agité par les soubresauts de la révolution industrielle et la contestation ouvrière. Le polar parle à l'homme aliéné du XXe, interroge ses conditions d'existence dans un environnement urbain à la fois fascinant et inquiétant. Le roman à énigme est passéiste; le polar, moderniste: sous couvert d'apporter au lecteur de l'évasion, il le remet en réalité face à face avec son histoire, sans offrir d'échappatoire aux impasses du présent." Tadié, *Polar américain* 13.

she uses the structures and themes of the genre to create something new in the service of her own personal artistic vision.

In the following chapter, Tzvetan Todorov's typology of detective fiction is used as a comparative template with which to begin the discussion of Oates's use of the genre. While taking notice of the current debate surrounding Todorov's work questioning the relevance of typology as methodology, this discussion refrains from substituting the former for the latter. In detective fiction, as in most literary domains, it is impossible, and indeed, most likely unproductive, to rigidly define categories. Nevertheless, though the boundaries are hazy and perpetually open to debate, boundaries, indeed, there are. It is necessary, in order to discuss the role detective fiction elements play in Oates's work, to have a general idea of what those elements might be, and Todorov's typology provides just such a general definition.

Todorov's essay is put to use here simply as a way to identify the generally accepted elements of the detective fiction genre. Once identified, successive chapters move on to offer further analysis. The discussion of Oates's texts that immediately follows, considering whether they are or are not detective fiction properly speaking, should by no means be understood as attempting to find a label that can be conveniently stuck on each text as a way to categorize and identify it. It is generally accepted among critics that Oates's work is undefinable, uncategorizable, and this study, too, adheres to this opinion. However, in order to proceed with the discussion of enigmaticity and the complex parodic interweaving of its themes with the detective fiction structure, it is first necessary to specify what the themes and structures of detective fiction are and to identify them in the corpus works.

Chapter VIII
Todorov's Typology as Template: Tool for Initial Analysis of Oates Corpus

Widespread theorizing about detective fiction began in the 1920s. It was then that Van Dine laid out his famous twenty rules that I will discuss further down. The writing of detective fiction, however, had been slowly developing over time. Critics debate to whom should be awarded the title of "author of first ever detective story." Some, such as Fereydoun Hoveyda, insist that "detective fiction" has existed in various forms for centuries, pointing out, among other examples, that gothic literature had already used the closed room problem to great effect.[506] Others, such as Roger Caillois[507] and Julian Symons,[508] express the more mainstream view among critics that the genre developed with the changing social conditions taking place at the beginning of the nineteenth century and award the "first" laurels to Edgar Allan Poe. According to Jerry Palmer, "by common consent the first detective story is Edgar Allan Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, published in 1841."[509] Whatever its origins, there is no dispute over the actual existence of the genre.

Tzvetan Todorov, in his essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction,"[510] outlines a comprehensive and versatile typology of the various forms comprising the overall genre commonly referred to as detective fiction.[511] He analyzes the two standard types – classic[512]

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[506] Fereydoun Hoveyda, *Histoire du roman policier* (Paris: Les Editions du Pavillon, 1965) 42-43. Hoveyda specifically mentions Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.
[507] Roger Caillois, *Puissances du roman* (Marseille: Editions du Sagittaire, 1942).
[508] Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1992).
[509] Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978) 107.
[510] Tzvetan Todorov, "Typologie du roman policier," *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 9-19. Citations are taken from the English translation: Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," *The Poetics of Prose,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977) 42-52. Hereafter abbreviated as *TT* for in-text citations.
[511] Some writers prefer the label "crime fiction" because of the fact that not all stories attributed to the genre involve an actual detective (amateur or professional) engaged in the act of detecting. I have chosen to retain the term "detective fiction" used by Todorov for two reasons. First, it retains the semantic link to Poe's tales of ratiocination. Second, it points to the mental processes of investigating, detecting and questioning that continue to be pertinent in all stories about crime.
[512] Alexander N. Howe, in his *It Didn't Mean Anything: A Psychoanalytic Reading of American Detective Fiction* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), states that both the terms

detective fiction (otherwise known as the puzzle story or the whodunit) and thriller – through both thematic and structural elements before going on to suggest the existence of a third type which he calls the suspense story. Using Todorov's typology as a template will help to avoid confusion in a diverse domain to which the whole or parts have variously been referred to as detective story, crime or mystery story, police novel and thriller.

3.8.1. Classic Detective Story[513]

3.8.1.1. Structure: Two Competing, Yet Complementary, Story Lines

According to Todorov, the basic defining characteristic of the classic detective story is that it is, in fact, made up of two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, two story lines which are completely independent from each other (*TT* 44). The first story is that of the crime which is over by the time the second story, that of the investigation, begins. In the second story, nothing much happens. The characters do not act, they only learn. Nothing can happen to them because one of the basic rules of the genre is that the detective is immune. Between the discovery of the crime (at the beginning) and the revelation of the guilty party (at the end), the story is comprised of what Todorov calls "a slow apprenticeship," a gradual process of discovery, in which the detective painstakingly examines clue upon clue and lead upon lead (*TT* 45).

A fundamental difference between the two story lines is their relationship to the writing process itself. The first story line (that of the crime) is completely independent of the writing of the book. The second one (that of the investigation) is the story of the book itself. It

"classic" and "classical" are used to reference the genre. Howe himself uses the term "classical" throughout his work.

[513] Todorov's English translator preferred the term "the whodunit" to translate the French "roman policier." While this effectively avoids the potential confusion of referring to both the genre and one of its types by relatively close terms, detective fiction and classic detective fiction/story respectively, the term "whodunit" has the problem of being both informal and outdated which is why I have chosen to use the term "classic detective fiction/story" instead of "whodunit."

is often written by a friend of the detective who acknowledges from the very beginning that he is writing the story of the investigation (*TT* 45). In other words, the story of the crime is the story of what actually happened and the story of the investigation explains how the reader (or narrator) learned the story of the crime. Todorov points out that these characteristics are not exclusively the domain of detective fiction. Rather, they correspond to what the Russian Formalists, in the 1920s, identified as two aspects of all fiction, what they called the "fable" (story) and the "subject" (plot) of a narrative. The story is what actually happened in life (the timeline of events) and the plot is the way in which the author presents this story, corresponding "to the literary devices the author employs" (*TT* 45). The story follows the chronological order of events. The plot, however, can be ordered in any way the author sees fit. Thus, these aspects do not correspond to two separate story lines, rather they are two aspects of the same work (*TT* 45-6). A work of fiction typically presents a plot and leaves it up to the reader to reconstitute the corresponding story. What Todorov finds unique about detective fiction is that it is able to put these two aspects side by side in one work; by the close of the text, the detective has reconstituted the story for us.

In order to explain this unusual juxtaposition, Todorov focuses on the special qualities of each story line, pointing out that the first one (that of the crime) is the story of an absence and the second one (that of the investigation) takes its importance only in its role as mediator between the reader and the story of the crime. The first one cannot be immediately present in the book, otherwise there would be no puzzle story; the second one exists only because of the need for an intermediary to relate the facts (*TT* 46). A brief look at a randomly selected Sherlock Holmes story will serve to illustrate Todorov's theory. In "A Case of Identity,"[514] Holmes is asked to solve the mystery of a "disappearing bridegroom." The plot is organized as follows: Holmes and Watson are visited by a Miss Mary Sutherland who appeals for help

[514] Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Case of Identity," *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996) 147-158.

in discovering what has become of Mr. Hosmer Angel. She relates the circumstances of her meeting with Mr. Angel, their short courtship and planned nuptials which have been put off due to the mysterious disappearance of the groom on the way to the church on the morning of the wedding. Holmes assures the young woman that he will look into the matter and announces to Watson that he must send two letters. After attending to a patient the whole of the next day, Watson arrives at Holmes's place late in the afternoon to find that his friend has received responses to his letters and is presently awaiting a visitor. Shortly, the men are visited by Miss Sutherland's stepfather, James Windibank, recipient of one of Holmes's letters. After a brief explanation of the peculiarities of typewriter script, Holmes reveals the story of the crime and the fact that Mr. Hosmer Angel was none other than the stepfather in disguise. Once this scoundrel has taken his leave, Holmes explains to Watson how he was able to arrive at his conclusions.

The crime in this instance is not murder. In fact, to be precise, no crime (in the sense of breaking the law) was actually committed. However, this has no effect on the structure of the narrative, the deception simply occupies the place of the crime in this instance. It is obvious that the plot follows the story of the investigation: victim appeals to detective, detective acts, detective exposes the solution to the mystery. The story of the "crime" as originally presented by the "victim" was faithful to her experience of the events; she simply lacked all the information necessary to completely understand them. The "fable" is filled in thanks to the extraordinary powers of observation and reflection possessed by the detective.

In addition to observing the dual nature of the classic detective story structure, Todorov points out the main plot devices employed towards maintaining this duality:

> We are concerned then in the whodunit with two stories of which one is absent but real, the other present but insignificant. This presence and this absence explain the existence of the two in the continuity of the narrative. The first involves so many conventions and literary devices (which are in fact the "plot" aspects of the narrative) that the author cannot leave them unexplained. These devices are, we may note, of essentially two types, temporal inversions and

> individual 'points of view': the tenor of each piece of information is determined by the person who transmits it, no observation exists without an observer; the author cannot, by definition, be omniscient as he was in the classical novel. (*TT* 46)

Conan Doyle employs both temporal inversions and individual points of view in "A Case of Identity." The term "temporal inversions" refers to what Todorov has otherwise discussed as the backward-looking nature of the structure. The reader discovers the truth in inverse order, going back in time. As for the multiple points of view, our look at the story's plot is enough to show that this device as well is at work here. Initially, we are presented only with the victim's, Miss Sutherland's, point of view and so the mystery remains as we are not privy to Holmes's observations until the next day when the girl's stepfather comes to call. Both of these devices are employed to some extent by Oates which will be made evident in the following discussion of the structures of *Rape: A Love Story* and *The Falls*.

3.8.1.2. Rape: A Love Story and The Falls

The incipit to *Rape: A Love Story* reveals the *fait divers* type crime that is the impetus of this novella: the gang rape of Teena Maguire in a city park on the 4th of July while her young daughter hides in a dark corner, paralyzed by fear, helpless to stop the attack. The repetitive use of the preposition "after" together with the past tense – "After she was gang-raped" (*RLS* 3) –, informs us that when the story opens, the crime has already been committed. The novella is divided into three parts, each representing a different frame on the timeline of the characters' experience following the attack. However, despite this initially straightforward-seeming organization, the events within the parts are not narrated in strict chronological order; rather, as I have shown, they are presented as a series of fragmented flashbacks, memories returning piecemeal to the characters' minds. In other words, plot and story correspond at the level of the three parts, but not within the parts themselves. Both the story of the crime and the story of what follows are intermingled in the memory flashbacks.

The intended murder of Teena Maguire is the point of departure for the story line of this novella. Similar to the classic model, the crime takes place before the narration begins and the story is generally concerned with the notion of bringing the guilty party to justice. However, unlike the classic detective story, the guilty party does not first need to be identified.[515] Here, from the point of view of the reader, there is no strictly crime-related mystery because the victim lives and is able to identify her assailants. However, the element of mystery is retained as far as the outcome of the legal proceedings are concerned; the court's understanding of the case does not coincide with that of the victims.

Of the four works studied here, this novella most closely resembles the structure of much contemporary crime fiction, in print and on screen. Like many popular television police shows that roughly follow the classic model, *Rape: A Love Story* opens with the revelation that a crime has been committed and proceeds to follow the police investigation into the crime and the subsequent judicial proceedings resulting from the investigation. The novella is also backward-looking as it is narrated through the focalizer of the grown Bethie (Teena's twelve-year-old daughter at the time of the rape) who, now an adult woman, is reflecting back on the events years later. Another characteristic that likens it to a more traditional detective fiction structure is the fact that, parallel to the detective gradually putting the pieces together in a classic detective story, the information here is remembered and presented to the reader in bits and pieces. In this way, the reader is put in the position of detective, having to assemble the various unordered, incomplete elements scattered throughout the narration. Let us take, for example, the police officer character, John Dromoor. This character is the first to arrive at the scene of the crime which causes him to feel a certain affinity for and responsibility to the victims. He is introduced on page 7. The reader first learns that he is relatively new to the police force and that he became a police officer at the age of thirty after having been in the

[515] Although there are of course examples from the beginnings of the genre where this is also the case. A prime example is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter."

military. We do not learn his last name, Dromoor, until page 11, and his first name, John, until the end of the following page.[516] Thus, though it remains very different from a classic detective story, this novella shares the latter's backward-looking structure and its attempt to make sense of violent events through a reflection on them.

The Falls is a long and complex novel of almost five hundred pages, one of what critics have spoken of as Oates's family sagas. It follows the story of a family from 1950 to 1978. Though it involves crimes and investigations, it is perhaps less detective fiction in the traditional sense because it involves so much background and character development. However, it may be read as just one crime story (the murder of Dirk Burnaby) whose complete portrayal needs two generations to be fully developed. It involves much more layering and context development than traditional crime fiction.

Like *Rape: A Love Story*, this novel is divided into three chronologically ordered parts and the story is set in the city of Niagara Falls. The story is concerned with different stages in the life of the central character, Ariah. Part I opens 12 June 1950 with a suicide jumper at Horseshoe Falls and concludes a month later with Dirk Burnaby telling Ariah he wants to marry her. Gilbert Erskine commits suicide at Niagara Falls less than twenty-four hours after his marriage to Ariah. The seven day long vigil kept at The Falls by the widow-bride waiting for the discovery of her husband's body results in her encounter with Dirk Burnaby, the Niagara Falls attorney who will become her second husband. Dirk is the local lawyer who accompanies Ariah during her wait. She needs the body to be recovered in order to feel released from the vows of her disastrous marriage. During this time, Dirk falls in love with Ariah, to his mind a woman of unusual qualities, among them fidelity, determination, independence, intelligence and musical talent. Part II narrates Ariah and Dirk's marriage from

[516] This technique is frequently used by Oates. Indeed, this is the case with all of the main characters in the four corpus works. It effectively foregrounds the mystery of personality with which her fiction is so often concerned.

beginning to end. Their giddy happiness at the outset of their life together gradually gives way to the routine of a young family with three children – Chandler (who may in fact be Gilbert's biological son), Royall and Juliet. Dirk's involvement in a sensitive local lawsuit – (that will come to be known years later as the original Love Canal case) – contributes to the unravelling of his marital bliss and to his death. His car goes off the road into the river just above the deadline in June 1962. He was murdered by an unidentified Niagara Falls police officer, though few people know of this fact. The death will officially be ruled an accident and it will commonly be suspected he committed suicide. Part III picks up the story of the family sixteen years later, when the children are grown. They become the central figures, though their relationship to Ariah is still key. Chandler, Royall and Juliet are troubled by their lack of knowledge about their father's life and death. Ariah, who does not know that Dirk was murdered, considered his involvement in the lawsuit and subsequent death as a betrayal of their little family and refuses to talk to the children about him. In this part, the three Burnaby children begin to investigate their father's life and death, eventually discovering the truth about what happened, which also helps them to see their own lives more clearly.

The murder of Dirk Burnaby in *The Falls* takes place in the last paragraphs of the second part. At this point, the reader knows when, where, why and how he was murdered but not who, precisely, is responsible. When looked at independently, part three of *The Falls* is the part of our corpus that most closely approaches the classic detective story sub-type in terms of structure. In this third part, the Burnaby children are grown. They know only when and where their father died, but not that it was murder. Their investigation is sparked by Royall's desire to fill in the gaps in his history. Information gradually builds up until they discover the truth about their father's death. However, there is no use of an intermediary to narrate. As in *Rape: A Love Story*, the facts are related through the focalizers of the characters

who actually experience them with sections alternating between the points of view of the three children, Chandler, Royall and Juliet.

The unique structure of this novel involves both forward- and backward-looking elements. The plot, taken as a whole, is forward-looking, beginning in 1950 and following the characters up until 1978. However, there are backward-looking elements within this forward moving plot, notably the Burnaby children's investigation into the circumstances surrounding the life and death of their father. Part III involves both of the motions at the same time so that the children seem to be engaged in a sort of tug-of-war with their mother. Ariah wants to erase the past and only look forward, whereas the children want to look back to fill in the missing gaps in their past. The result is a sort of stalemate, a stagnation, wherein the children seem to be trapped in a rotten, unsatisfactory present. To begin moving forward again, they must band together, yank the rope, to win the chronological tug-of-war with their mother. Hence, the explanation for the complex layering at work in the story.

Paradoxically, this novel, which in many ways bears the least resemblance of the works studied here to much other crime fiction, is the only one to involve significant amateur detecting.[517] Royall does research into his father at the local library. Chandler contacts the police and other of his father's former associates. Though certain elements of these Oates works call to mind elements of the classic detective story type, they are much bigger than the mold and it is quite apparent they cannot even remotely be reduced to it.

[517] Later, we will see that Gillian, the narrator in *Beasts*, engages in certain acts of detection as well, though not to the same extent as Chandler and Royall Burnaby.

3.8.2. Thriller

The "thriller" is the second well-established detective fiction type to which Todorov dedicates a discussion. He, like Tadié, identifies it as a genre "created in the United States just before and particularly after World War II" (*TT* 47). Catherine Pesso-Miquel agrees, pointing out that "the thriller, as it was created by D. Hammett in the United States, rejects the artifices and conventions of classic English detective fiction, becoming brutal, realistic and cynical."[518] This evolution of the artifices and conventions is accompanied in part by a modified structure.

Before proceeding, however, a brief clarification of terminology will be helpful. Todorov uses three terms to refer to three sub-types of the detective fiction genre. I have been referring to the first, which he called *roman à énigme* and which was translated by "whodunit," as the classic detective story. Todorov's second type is the *roman noir*, translated by thriller. The third, and final type, in Todorov's typology is called the *roman à suspens*, translated as suspense novel, and corresponds roughly to the hard-boiled fiction of Hammett and Chandler. Todorov's tripartite subdivision of the genre is relatively unique. Most other commentators do not distinguish between his second and third types. Thus, Benoît Tadié and Catherine Pesso-Miquel, for example, use the terms *roman noir* or *polar* to refer to both. Julian Symons uses the term "crime fiction" in a similar way. The assignment of labels can therefore be misleading and they must always be analyzed keeping the intentions of the theorist who uses them in mind.

[518] My translation of: "Le roman noir, tel que D. Hammett l'a créé aux Etats-Unis, rejette les artifices et les conventions du roman policier à l'anglaise, et se veut brutal, réaliste et cynique." Catherine Pesso-Miquel, "Le chevalier, le gentleman, la dame et la putain: codes chevaleresques dans le roman noir," *Americana* 13 "Formes et structures génériques du roman policier – Nabokov," ed. Jeanne-Marie Santraud (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1996) 77.

3.8.2.1. Structure: One Story Line, Different Reader Interest

The structure of the thriller is very different from that of the classic detective story. Todorov defines it in the following way: "this kind of detective fiction fuses the two stories or, in other words, suppresses the first and vitalizes the second" By this he means that thrillers no longer deal with crimes that occurred prior to the events being narrated (as is the case in the classic detective story), but rather with a story in which the narration and the action coincide. One of the different characteristics is that the reader is no longer sure whether the hero will live to the end of the story, thus "no thriller is presented in the form of memoirs." The narrative of the thriller is forward-looking whereas that of the classic detective story is backward-looking: Prospection takes the place of retrospection (*TT* 47).

The previous discussion of the narrative structures of *Rape: A Love Story* and *The Falls* showed that *Rape: A Love Story* is a memoir in the sense that it is presented as remembered events from a point more than ten years in the future. However, it is not backward-looking in the same sense as the classic detective story. Bethie does not seek an answer about the facts behind past events. If she seeks to elucidate any thing, it is the nature of human character and the aleatory, rather cruel nature of fate. *The Falls* works differently. Taken as a whole, action and narration coincide in the novel and it is forward-looking like a thriller. Part III, however, when examined independently of the rest of the novel, can be considered backward-looking in the way of the classic detective story as the Burnaby children seek to fill the gaps in their knowledge concerning their father's life and death. The structures of two other works remain to be examined, those of *Beasts* and *The Tattooed Girl*.

3.8.2.2. Beasts and The Tattooed Girl

Beasts is another backward-looking work. The main action is narrated from twenty-five years later by the main character herself, Gillian. The site of a familiar totem in the

Louvre brings back the memory of the events related in the story: "I was thinking of the deaths of two people I'd loved, a long time go. They'd died horribly, and their deaths were believed to be accidental" (*B* 2). This "believed to be" together with the closing lines of the chapter indicate that the narrator knows something more about these deaths: "I was forty-four years old. A quarter-century had passed. This is not a confession. You will see, I have nothing to confess" (*B* 3). This chapter and the final one, which continues the Paris story line, frame the main action with which the story is concerned, the fires at Catamount College and the narrator's developing relationships mainly during the fall of 1975 and early winter of 1976 leading up to the deaths of the two people she had loved so long ago. This structure is similar to that used by Donna Tartt in her *The Secret History.*[519] The reader knows from the opening pages that someone has been killed and by whom. This is because years later the narrator has decided to explain what led them to the point of feeling it necessary to kill someone close to them.

The narrative enclosed in this framework seems forward-looking, however; it is as if Gillian is reliving the events so the action and narration seem to coincide. The organization is oddly symmetrical, mirror-like. There are an even twenty-four chapters (the majority of which conveniently include a temporal reference), the first and last of which share the same title: "Paris, France: 11 February 2002." The second and penultimate chapters also share a title: "The Alarm: 20 January 1976." The twenty chapters in between progress chronologically from 26 September 1975 to 19 January 1976 with the exception of one, Chapter 5, "Peach," which flashes back to a classroom experience from March 1975. The narrator is not piecing together elements of a puzzle, she is relating an experience as she lived it. This is a memoir-type confession story which has the effect of seeming forward-looking because the framing is quickly forgotten once the narration starts proceeding chronologically. The reader becomes

[519] Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1993).

completely wrapped up in Gillian's obsessive interrogations about the fires, the Harrows and her classmates, viewing her as a self-interested amateur detective rather than as the bearer of a guilty conscious indicated by the framing device.

With *The Tattooed Girl* we are back to a novel in which action and narration coincide. In fact, in this case, the two completely coincide. This work is intensely forward-looking and holds reader interest by creating the expectation of a murder which does not actually take place until the very end, and then does not involve the expected characters. Joshua Seigl is not, in the end, murdered by his assistant, Alma Busch. This novel is divided into four parts. Part One, "The Tattooed Girl," introduces the two characters mentioned above as well as a third important character, Dmitri Meatte. Dmitri is a waiter who works at The Café, a local restaurant frequented by Seigl for both dining and chess playing. He is a low-life criminal character who is linked to Alma in a sort of oppressor-victim relationship. When Seigl invites Alma to come work for him in the very last lines of Part One, it is clear that the stage has been set for unfortunate circumstances in later parts. Seigl has unwittingly invited Dmitri Meatte closer into his life through Alma. Part One also introduces the existence of a fourth significant character, Seigl's sister, Jet Steadman Seigl, though she will not appear as part of the action until the second part.

Part Two, "The Assistant," begins with Alma Busch starting work for Seigl, continues through his developing illness and then a remission period and ends with his symptoms returning. Little forward movement happens in this long section which is mostly character development and development of the relationships between the characters. One of the ways in which Oates creates suspense in this novel, as we have seen, is through point of view, alternating chapters narrated through different focalizers. In this way, it becomes apparent to the reader that some of the views are misguided, such as Seigl's ideas about Alma. Seigl is reassured to think that "in another part of the house his sweet girl-assistant Alma Busch

labored to put his life in order" (*TTG* 106). He does not catch on that she hates him on principle for being a rich Jew despite the fact that he is nice to her (*TTG* 149) and that she steals things from him to show or outright give to Dmitri Meatte: a letter (*TTG* 104); "a beautiful leather briefcase" and "gold cuff links engraved with initials *A.D.S.*"; "forks, knives, serving ladles" (*TTG* 153); and checks in the amount of $6,340" (*TTG* 159). Other ideas which are presented as belonging to crazy characters appear much more lucid, such as Jet's ideas about Alma's ignoble designs. Dmitri's talk of a gun in the penultimate chapter sets up the idea that the action will start moving forward again, perhaps in the next part, and reminds the reader that his intentions towards Seigl are sinister. In the final chapter of this part, Alma's character is further developed. She is a victim, yearning for love, but totally flawed in the way she perceives relationships, in what she does and does not value.

The textual clues throughout the third part of the story, "Nemesis," seem to clearly indicate that Seigl will meet with an untimely death at the hands of his assistant, Alma Busch. Upon several occasions she expresses her hatred and desire to kill her employer and engages in acts of sabotage around his house. She does things such as loosening railings and steps on the property so that he might accidentally fall off the cliff behind the house (*TTG* 229) and steeping used tissues, "thick with mucus" in his tea (*TTG* 235). "Several times, she mingled his pills" (*TTG* 231). On another occasion she smashes a glass and mixes some crushed glass into his dinner (201-2) though an accident results in his not actually eating the dish. However, these failed attempts turn out to be nothing but "red herrings." Dmitri's disappearance and Seigl's subsequent hospitalization combine to contribute to a dramatic turn of events. The loss Alma feels after Dmitri Meatte's disappearance and her vigil experience at the hospital lead to a change in her feelings for her employer by the end of Part III. She no longer hates him or has any animosity towards him or his friends. She has acknowledged and accepted her positive feelings for the man: "Calmly she thought *I don't hate any of them. No longer*. She

thought *I am the one he loves*. For this truth was clear to her: and did not require saying" (*TTG* 281). At this point, the reader is quite possibly feeling he has been tricked. The drama that is built up throughout the story does not materialize in the promised form. Seigl does die at the end of part three, but not in the expected way. He dies by accident rather than at the hand of his employee who has, as hoped, changed over to the "good" side and violently expelled Dmitri Meatte from her life. Yet a crime is committed. Part Four, "The Shadows," reserves a surprise plot twist. Quite unexpectedly it is Alma who is violently murdered in the final pages of the novel. In our corpus, *The Tattooed Girl*[520] is the work that is most thriller-like. *Beasts* gives the illusion of forward movement but remains a backward-looking memoir type narrative.

3.8.2.3. The Mystery Element

An element of detective fiction that is directly related to its structure is the way in which the story creates and maintains reader interest. The classic detective story maintains reader interest through the element of the unknown. A murder has been committed, but we do not know by whom. Plot devices such as temporal inversions and multiple points of view are employed to artificially maintain this opacity. Other elements may be unclear as well: the what and where are usually known because a body has been discovered, but it may also be necessary for the detective to determine the when, the why and the how. The reader is interested in following the investigation that will reveal the answers to these questions. However, this element of mystery is contingent on the specific nature of the puzzle story structure. What is responsible for keeping the reader interested once these two story lines are merged as is the case in the thriller?

[520] Oates has also adapted a play of *The Tattooed Girl*, written "more or less simultaneously with the novel." This process was facilitated, according to the author, by the fact that "the novel is comprised of chapters that can be reduced to scenes. […] Some of the chapters involving Seigl and Alma, on the nature of the Holocaust and on the nature of art, are virtually debates." Johnson, "Fictions of the New Millennium" 390.

Todorov explains that there are two different forms of reader interest, one which he calls "curiosity" and another which he calls "suspense." The first form works from effect to cause (classic detective fiction), the second one in the opposite direction, from cause to effect (thriller). In the second, our interest is in what is going to happen now that we have been presented with some initial information, not in having a past mystery elucidated for us. Suspense interest is not possible in the puzzle story where the detective is immune to harm, but in the thriller, the detective risks his life (*TT* 47); there are no conventions tacitly protecting any of the characters from harm; anything may happen. Thus, in thrillers, the mystery element has to do with wondering what will happen as the story progresses, which is the same type of reader interest involved with the traditional novel. Indeed, as Iser has discussed, a literary work is a form of communication. As such, it necessarily involves an element of the enigmatic as "the meaning of the text is something that [the reader] has to assemble."[521]

For each of the corpus works, I have reduced the mystery element down to one essential question: "Will there be justice?" for *Rape: A Love Story*, "Why did they die?" for *Beasts*, "Who killed Dirk Burnaby?" for *The Falls*, and "How will he die?" for *The Tattooed Girl*. This exercise may be criticized for its oversimplification of the issues. However, it enables us to see in a single glance whether the movement of the mystery element of each plot is forward or backward-looking. Two of the interrogations use the modal "will" in its future sense which implies a forward-looking cause-to-effect structure and I will show that this is indeed the case for both *Rape: A Love Story* and *The Tattooed Girl*. The other two formulations, pertaining respectively to *Beasts* and *The Falls*, use the simple past, indicating a backward-looking effect to cause structure. Though the structures of these two works are complex, as we have already seen, the following discussion will show that the narrative flows

[521] Iser, *Act of Reading* ix.

in reverse once we pinpoint the unique structure of the mystery element surrounding the crime at the heart of the plot.

Will there be justice?

As previously mentioned, *Rape: A Love Story* is the sole corpus work to open upon the information that a crime has been committed. However, though it is in some ways a retrospective account of getting justice in the case, there is no element of mystery in relation to the crime itself.[522] All of the basic elements are revealed in the very first chapter which is only four pages long. We learn that the victim is a woman named Teena Maguire, single mother of a twelve-year-old daughter, and the perpetrators are a group of about a half dozen "neighborhood guys" whose faces "she'd recognized" (*RLS* 4). The very first sentence introduces the what and the where: "After she was gang-raped, kicked and beaten and left to die on the floor of the filthy boathouse at Rocky Point Park" (*RLS* 3). The final sentence tells us that this happened "in the early minutes of July 5, 1996" (*RLS* 6). The why and how are developed throughout: The guys had "been drifting around the park for hours looking for trouble. Looking for some fun. Drinking beer and tossing cans into the lagoon and all the firecrackers they had, they'd set off" (*RLS* 4). When the opportunity presented itself in the "mostly deserted" park, they chased their victim "like a pack of dogs jumping their prey" (*RLS* 3). Thanks to this summary of the attack, the crime itself does not need to be investigated and explained to the reader. However, there are elements to captivate reader interest. One of these is the desire to see whether or not the rapists will be brought to justice. The interest in this story therefore works from cause to effect. Other aspects include: Will the

[522] This is not precisely true. The facts in the case are established. However, mystery remains in terms of the reader's understanding of the experiences of both victims and perpetrators whose memories are fragmented and occasionally hazy.

victims fully recover? How will they manage to cope? What will happen to them? These story line components will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

One sub-component of the reader interest element concerns the nature of the detective, in fact, of all the characters. In order for the mystery element to retain its authenticity, the reader must be convinced that no one is immune and that anything that can happen in the real world can happen to any of the characters.[523] One of the central elements of this forward-moving thriller structure is the "hard-boiled" detective character as developed by such authors as Hammett and Chandler. Todorov does not specifically describe this character. For a slightly more detailed look, let us turn to a passage from an essay by Timothy Shuker-Haines and Martha M. Umphrey:

> The hard-boiled detective stands in stark opposition to [the classic archetype, a Miss Marple or a Jessica Fletcher]. His locale is not the drawing room but the liminal zone of the criminal underworld, and his qualities are not intuition and social knowledge but violence and a personal code of honor. Whereas the classic detective novel presents a stable social order with an isolated crime, hard-boiled fiction presents a world filled with corruption, destabilized by the dangerous allure of female sexuality. With his strict code of honor and renunciation, the hard-boiled hero embodies a vision of righteousness and justice.[524]

Prior to these critics, Boileau and Narcejac had analyzed the thriller detective as "a sort of reverse criminal": "a detective who basically comes from the same sphere as those he will chase, who speaks like them, dresses like them and is as brutal as they are, in short, a man who has chosen to live dangerously for a poor salary."[525]

Oates provides an example of a hard-boiled type detective in the character of John Dromoor, the police officer in *Rape: A Love Story*, who is introduced in the following way:

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[523] Here, I mean the real world as opposed to the fantastic, an ontological mode of existence different from our own. This is because reader interest is created by actively involving the reader in searching for the solution, something which they cannot do if the rules of another ontology apply.

[524] Timothy Shuker-Haines and Martha M. Umphrey, "Gender (De)Mystified: Resistance and Recuperation in Hard-Boiled Female Detective Fiction," *The Detective in American Fiction, Film, and Television*, eds. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998) 71.

[525] My translation of: "une sorte de criminel à l'envers"; "un détective issu, à très peu près, du même milieu que ceux qu'il va traquer, parlant comme eux, s'habillant comme eux, aussi brutal qu'eux, bref, un homme qui a choisi de vivre dangereusement pour un maigre salaire." Pesso-Miquel 77.

> Weird a guy like him wearing a uniform! He had not the temperament for wearing a uniform. He had not the temperament for following orders, saluting. He had not the temperament for listening closely to others, designated as superiors. (*His* superiors? Bullshit.) Since grade school he'd had trouble with authority. Restless under the eye of anybody and looking to find his own private way, sullen and sly like a chimp hiding something behind his back.

When this description of a taciturn loner figure "looking to find his own private way" is coupled with the short paragraph following it, the outline of the hard-boiled hero is nearly complete: "What he liked was the idea of justice, though. Putting-things-back-to-right he liked. Such abstractions as law, good conduct, valor in service, eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth" (*RLS* 7). Other elements over the course of the second and third chapters help fill out this portrait. Dromoor is "mostly estranged" from his family (*RLS* 8). Though he is married and his wife is having their baby (*RLS* 10, 15), he often does not engage in typically socially acceptable behavior. He is "not a man to talk much about himself" and his partner complains that he is too quiet (*RLS* 11). He is described as "indifferent to others' opinions of all things" (*RLS* 13). The information that he is "an old-style cop of another era" emphasizes the fact that he does not fit in with his current social group. Chillingly, he is detached from much of humanity by the feeling that he lost his soul during his military service in Desert Storm: "And one bright hallucinatory morning in the desert he saw his soul curl up and die like an inchworm in the hot sand. / At first he'd missed it. Then he forgot" (*RLS* 10). Dromoor is a man of action and instinct, characteristics which are illustrated by the story of his first shooting in the Niagara Falls Police Department and the proleptic conclusion to Chapter Two: "This was John Dromoor's first kill in the NFPD. It would not be his last" (*RLS* 12). The idea of biblical, moral justice is important to him and he will feel obliged to act when legal justice fails, the possibility of which is indicated from the very beginning in the "unfair" speculation about the victim somehow deserving what happened to her, bringing it upon herself, indicating that a defense attorney might easily instill "reasonable doubt" in the minds of a jury.

The presence of a character like John Dromoor in the novella, introduced so early on, can only mean one thing: he is going to be called on to act, and to act in favor of the victims who have not only been physically victimized but whose victimization is continuing through psychological abuse, not only by the aggressors, but by both the judicial process and community gossip as well. This feeling is reinforced through the story in Chapter Three, "The Friend," of Teena's and John's meeting in the Horseshoe Bar & Grill one night nearly two years before the rape during which they established a friendly rapport and Teena called him her friend (*RLS* 15). In this way, Dromoor's presence in the novella, introduced early on, acts as an intertextual signal to the reader who is able to associate his character-type with that of the traditional hard-boiled thriller detective. This adds to the creation of suspense because though the reader knows Dromoor will be called on to act, he does not know how and is anxious to find out.

Why did they die?

Contrary to *Rape: A Love Story*, in *Beasts* the deaths do not occur until late on the timeline of events. However, the structure of the novella results in the mystery element centering around them from the very beginning. In the initial pages, preceding the flashbacks, the homodiegetic narrator reveals that two people she had loved "a long time ago" had "died horribly, and their deaths were believed to be accidental" (*B* 2). After this initial chapter, various questions might arise in the mind of the reader, including: How did the two people die? What was their relationship to the narrator? What does she know about their deaths? Though she claims she has "nothing to confess" (*B* 3), was she involved? Was it murder? In addition, why does the sight of the totem, "identified simply as an aboriginal 'Maternal Figure' from British Columbia, Canada, at least two hundred years old," affect her so strongly that she gets "confused," stops "thinking coherently" and shudders (*B* 1)?

The narrator claims the text "is not a confession" as she has "nothing to confess" (*B* 3). Indeed, the narrative that follows is presented, through the setup of the initial chapter, less as a desire to explain the two deaths than as a desire to expose the reason the unexpected sight of the totem affected her so deeply. This appears to be in some way linked to the thoughts, or perhaps memories, represented in the text in italics, that the experience of seeing the totem provokes: "*Don't be afraid. We are beasts, this is our consolation*" and "*We are beasts, we feel no guilt. / Never guilt*" (*B* 2). The phrase "appears to be in some way linked to" turns out to be quite appropriate in the context of this novella. Indeed, *Beasts* may be the most enigmatic of the corpus works. This is in large part due to the first person narrator who comes across as emotionally unstable, an emotional instability which is enhanced by the themes of secrecy, hesitation and constant questioning that run throughout the text. Indeed, in *Beasts*, as discussed in Chapter 3, few facts are known for sure.

The first mystery element to be introduced in the plot concerns the deaths of the narrator's two former loved ones. How did their deaths come about and at whose hand? Gillian's? Someone else's? Gillian's with the help of someone else? Accident? Or murder? The second concerns the origin of the fires set around the Catamount College campus. Who is the mysterious arsonist and what purpose can they have for setting the fires? Parallel to these concrete interrogations into observable reality is another layer of inquiry concerning identity and motive. Gillian does not think she fits in with her classmates; she sees herself as girlish rather than womanly. In addition, she feels estranged from her parents, thinking "And do I know them? How do I know them, except as their daughter born when they were middle-aged?" (*B* 79). She is clearly looking for a relationship that will bring meaning and status to her life, a relationship she believes she finds with her professor. Her mistake, as we have seen, is in the expectation that a meaningful identity can be provided for her by others.

The two mysteries of the deaths and the fires may or may not be directly related and are initially introduced separately so let me begin with the former. In terms of Todorov's reader interest analysis, the mysterious deaths conform to the "curiosity" model because we first learn of their occurrence (effect), then are taken back in time to discover the details (cause). It is the framing device of the first chapter that accounts for this backward-looking structure.

Chapter Two gives some clues about the identity of the victims and the mode of their deaths and reinforces the notion of the narrator's involvement and untrustworthiness. The residents of Heath Cottage are awakened by a fire alarm pulled in their residence. They stumble out of bed and out of doors: "We saw: the fire was elsewhere. Not Heath Cottage. The alarm in our residence had been pulled in error. We should have felt relief, the fire was a half-mile away. Where? One of the faculty houses on Brierly Lane?" (*B* 6). Firemen have already arrived at the scene, however, "the fire would burn 'out of control' for a lethal period of more than an hour." Not only is it a faculty house that is burning, but several of the girls seem to suspect that it is the house of someone they know: "Some of us wanted to slip past the proctors and make our way across campus, to Brierly Lane. To see for ourselves what was happening. Whose house was burning. [...] *Whose house is it, burning? Is it . . .?*" (*B* 6-7). The clues at this point seem to indicate that at least one of the victims is a faculty member of Catamount College known to a group of girls residing at Heath Cottage and that this person died in a fire that consumed their home. The final sentences of the chapter reinforce the untrustworthiness of the narrator and seem to indicate that this is no sweet, ordinary, young woman:

> I was such a small girl, I weighed only ninety pounds. But don't be deceived. Or maybe: I hadn't been awakened by the siren. I hadn't been awakened by the fire alarm. Or by the other girls' cries. In fact, I hadn't slept yet that night, I'd been lying partly undressed in my cot-sized bed, Catamount College-issue with no frills, a metal frame, lumpy mattress, and no headboard, writing in my journal notebook as I'd been commanded. *Go for the jugular*. (*B* 7)

Had she or had she not been sleeping? Which version are we to believe? The concluding "*Go for the jugular*" would seem to indicate that she has performed some significant action. The specific identity of the victims and the circumstances of their deaths are still unknown, but everything thus far seems to point to a relationship between Gillian, a professor and his/her mysterious fiery death.

Chapter 3, "My (Secret) Journal," effectively begins the narrative of the fateful Fall 1975 events. The narrator opens by confessing that at the time, 26 September 1975, she believed herself to be in love with her poetry professor, Andre Harrow (*B* 9). Her infatuation is not strictly limited to his person, however, because, as Gillian writes: "If you love a married man you exist in a special, secret, undeclared relationship with his wife" (*B* 10) Consequently, she finds she not only broods upon Andre Harrow but also is "distracted by thoughts of his wife" (*B* 11). In this same chapter, we are introduced to the notion that this attraction is not the exclusive domain of Gillian and that there is something mysterious, maybe even improper, going on between Andre, Dorcas and certain Catamount students:

> It was said that Dorcas had few friends in Catamount, even among the artists, but that from time to time she accepted an "intern" to help in her studio, sometimes even to model. She and Andre Harrow sometimes befriended Catamount girls – "special" girls.
> I was jealous, I don't deny it. I believed I knew two or three of these girls. I wasn't certain. There was an air of secrecy about this. It was said that if a girl behaved as if she were on intimate terms with Mr. Harrow, or dropped Dorcas's name casually, it meant just the opposite. (*B* 14)

Gillian's infatuation and curiosity sometimes lead her to take on the role of detective. Her motives are not selfless or simply for the sake of justice, however. She has already confessed to being motivated by jealousy. In Chapter 3, she recounts an episode during which she followed Dorcas through the woods into town and tells of the excitement she felt at following another person in secret (*B* 9-10). She "made inquiries about Dorcas" and asked her friends Dominique and Sybil about the couple (*B* 48). Dominique claims she has never been

invited to the couple's house, yet Sybil's information seems to prove otherwise (*B* 49). One night in October, a fire alarm is pulled at Heath Cottage and Marisa is initially absent for roll call. Gillian's thoughts turn to Dorcas and Andre Harrow: "I wondered if, a half-mile away on Brierly Lane, Dorcas and Mr. Harrow had been wakened by the commotion. I hoped so. / And if anyone was with them, I hoped she'd been wakened, too" (*B* 54). These thoughts together with the fact that when Marisa finally shows up she does not want to say where she has been (*B* 55) lead Gillian to be suspicious of her. It is only much later, once her own involvement with Dorcas and Andre is established that Gillian actually finds proof of the couple's involvement with others.

The second mystery concerns the origin of the campus fires, story line introduced in the fourth chapter:

> At Catamount College in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains, in southwest Massachusetts in the gauzy aftermath of the Vietnam War that was the mid-1970s, there had been several small, mysterious fires. Local authorities had determined each of the fires to be arson, but no arsonist or arsonists had yet been identified. So far, in the fall of my junior year, the fires had been confined to areas of the campus, like the main dining hall after closing, where no one was likely to be injured. Oily rags were set aflame in a trash can behind the eighteenth-century colonial that housed the Humanities Department, in fact, just below the second-floor office of Professor Andre Harrow, but this, too, had been during the night. There was a similar fire of oily rags set in a vestibule of the administration building, and smoldering books in a remote corner of the college library (subject: pre-Socratic Greek philosophy) set off fire alarms and sprinklers that sent everyone in the building, including me, rushing panicked for the exits; but, except for a girl who fell and broke her ankle, no one was injured.
>
> Yet we never knew, when we went to bed at night, whether we'd be wakened by alarms, and whether the alarms would be false or real. We never knew whether our own residence might be burning. We never knew (we told each other, with grim humor) whether we might be 'burned alive' in our beds.
>
> No one seemed to know, or would acknowledge, who was doing these things, or why. (*B* 21-2)

The motive for the campus fires is a cause of discussion and speculation among Gillian and her friends. The mid-seventies are no longer a period of political activism on the campus, thus "clearly, it had to be a private purpose." Gillian's passionate infatuation with her professor

leads her to imagine a motive for the unknown arsonist. She imagines it as the mode of expression for a girl who is in love but scorned and unheeded (*B* 22). Unless *she* is the arsonist. This notion is easily entertained because Gillian is a first person unreliable retrospective narrator, but difficult to prove for the same reason. Gillian and her friends, other residents of Heath Cottage, discuss the subject and determine that the culprit "has to be someone who's a student" at the college because an outsider would have been noticed in the library, but that is as far as they can get (*B* 24). In fact, the mystery surrounding the origins of the fires will never be elucidated. Gillian informs us in the final chapter that "the Catamount College arsonist of 1974-1975 was never identified. Generally, it was believed that Marisa Spires was guilty" (*B* 137) However, Marisa's guilt was apparently never proven and other fires were set later around Catamount that Marisa could not have been responsible for. Certainly, Gillian herself and all of her Heath Cottage friends had the same motives for setting the fires. The narrator's confession enables us to attribute the origin of the fire which killed the Harrows to her, but she remains silent on the subject of the others. Either she does not know, or does not wish to tell. The Catamount campus arsons also, then, correspond to the "curiosity" model of reader interest, from effect to cause. However, in this instance, the cause remains indeterminable.

As mentioned above, indeterminacy, in fact, pervades the novella. Gillian is obsessed by this state of uncertainty, of not-knowing. This sort of puzzle is a common one in Oates stories. In fact, the main character finds herself in the situation where her mental well-being – or that of her friends, if she is indeed withholding the information of her own guilt – is contingent on information unavailable to her. As remarked by Uri Eisenzweig in his analysis of Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "uncertainty" is a kind of "madness." This statement obviously has more wide-ranging implications than those developed above. Eisenzweig's theory will be discussed in more depth in the final chapter.

Who killed Dirk Burnaby?

The Falls is a complex novel mingling both types of reader interest. Considered in its entirety, with its chronological progression of over almost thirty years, it globally corresponds to a suspense structure. An event takes place and we wonder what effect it will have on the characters, structure that keeps repeating itself page after page. In the first part, Ariah's husband commits suicide and the reader wonders what will happen to the heroine now? In Part Two, Ariah and Dirk are married: Will they live happily ever after? In Part Three, the now fatherless children are becoming adults: How will they turn out? This is, in fact, the typical sort of mechanism that retains the interest of a novel reader, a feeling of attachment to the characters. This is what Wayne Booth terms "practical interest," explaining: "If we look closely at our responses to most great novels, we discover that we feel a strong concern for the characters as people; we care about their good and bad fortune."[526]

However, on a micro-scale, there are sub-plots involving curiosity interest, intricately linked to the device of multiple viewpoints. The first chapter, "The Gatekeeper's Testimony: 12 June 1950," recounts the tale of the suicide from the point of view of the gatekeeper who has never seen the man before. Many questions about the suicide and his violent self-inflicted action are raised, notably: Who is he? and Why did he feel it necessary to kill himself? Much of the second part is devoted to Dirk's involvement in "the legal action known initially as the Olshaker case; subsequently, and more notoriously, referred to as 'Love Canal'" (*TF* 194). The action of constituting a legal case is one of working from effect back to cause. Finally, there is the Burnaby children's investigation in Part Three into their father's death which has

[526] Booth 129. Booth identifies three "types of literary interest" in the reader: "(1) Intellectual or cognitive: We have, or can be made to have, strong intellectual curiosity about 'the facts,' the true interpretation, the true reasons, the true origins, the true motives, or the truth about life itself. (2) Qualitative: We have, or can be made to have, a strong desire to see any pattern or form completed, or to experience a further development of qualities of any kind. [...] (3) Practical: We have, or can be made to have, a strong desire for the success or failure of those we love or hate, admire or detest; or we can be made to hope for or fear a change in the quality of a character." (125)

already been identified as the part of our corpus which is most like the classic structure. The time has now come to take a closer look.

In the opening pages of this part, it becomes clear that Ariah has done her best to erase, as much as possible, the existence of Dirk Burnaby from the children's lives. She does not talk about him, nor will she tolerate questions about him from her children. She even went so far as to make Chandler promise never to talk to his siblings about their father. She instructs them to tell others that his death happened before they were born (even though this argument cannot possibly logically apply to all three of them). Ariah considers Dirk betrayed his family by his all-consuming involvement in the Love Canal case which caused him to leave his wife and children. Royall and Juliet know only that their father died in a car accident in the river (*TF* 278, 295); Chandler, old enough at the time to have some memories, knows that though the police investigation ruled it to be an accident, the death was believed by most to be suicide:

> Chandler told Melinda that he supposed most people who knew Dirk Burnaby believed he'd killed himself. He'd been driving at a high speed [...] in a severe thunderstorm. He'd only recently lost an important court case, and he was nearly bankrupt. (*TF* 349)

Royall senses that because of his mother's silence on the matter, others outside the family, his boss, for example, know more about him than he does. Juliet, too, senses that others know more than she does: "Already in first grade the others seemed to know. (But what did they know?)" (*TF* 418). Kids at school taunt her with their knowledge of her family's shame:

> "*Burn-a-by. Your father drove his car into the river, your father was gonna go to jail. Burn-a-by, shame-shame!* Older brothers and sisters must have told them. Adults must have told these older brothers and sisters. (But what?)" (*TF* 419)

Royall's experience of realizing he is not in love with his fiancée, Candace, and calling off the wedding on the very eve of the ceremony prompts him to reflect upon the past of his own parents:

> Royall was thinking for the first time that his mother and father must have been in love, once. A long time ago when they'd gotten married. And for how many

> years afterward? Then, something had happened. He wanted to know what! He had to know. But seeing the look in Ariah's face, he knew it wasn't going to be this evening." (*TF* 320)

Once he realizes that he will not get anywhere with his mother, Royall next appeals to his older brother, the only one of the three who can remember their father (*TF* 329). He wants answers to such questions as "*Why did she hate our father so much? Why was she so afraid of him? What kind of man was he?*" (*TF* 330). Chandler refuses to tell his brother anything because of his childhood promise to his mother, but suggests Royall can investigate on his own: "*Nobody can stop you from knowing whatever you can discover. But I can't be the one to tell you*" (*TF* 330).

Royall is forced to resort to conducting his own investigation. In this way he becomes the first detective on the case. He visits the public library with a view to looking through old newspapers. It comes as a surprise to him to learn that they are stored "underground" and he must descend several levels in order to do his research:

> On level C, Royall felt as if he'd descended into a submarine. The periodical annex was a pitch-black cavernous space where visitors had to switch on their own lights. Royall worried that someone might come along, a librarian or a custodian, and switch off the stairwell lights, leaving him stranded underground. (*TF* 331-332)

This voyage into the depths of the library is reminiscent of Dirk's involvement in the Love Canal affair, when he felt like he was descending into an underworld: [527] "*Into the underworld then I descended. Where you can't see, can't breathe. Suffocating in black muck. In shame*" (*TF* 218).

Royall understands that his father was in some way connected with the original Love Canal proceedings, so he begins his search looking for papers from early 1962 (*TF* 332-333).

[527] Chapter 2 showed that the underworld theme is also present in *The Tattooed Girl*. In Oates's writing, the motif of descending into the underworld is linked equally to the idea of venturing into unknown realms and to the notion of grappling with mysterious unconscious impulses, the underworld is a synonym in her poetics for the night-side of the personality.

Frustratingly for the reader, we learn that Royall's efforts in the library are fruitful, but we are not privy to their content:

> Two hours and forty minutes Royall read, and re-read. He was beyond exhaustion. He could not have said if he was exhilarated, or frightened. There was so much more than he'd known, so much more than he'd been capable of imagining. He felt as if a door had suddenly opened in the sky, where you had not known there could be a door. A massive opening through which light shone. As light often shone, through fissures in thunderclouds, if only for a few tantalizing minutes, in the sky above the Great Lakes. It was blinding light, hurtful, not yet illuminating. But it was light. (*TF* 335)

Later, when Chandler also decides to make "inquiries into Dirk Burnaby's life, and into his death" (*TF* 375), we learn indirectly that Royall's investigation has not stopped at reading the newspapers in the library when their father's former receptionist tells Chandler that she had already spoken to his brother "a few months ago" (*TF* 382). Thus, when the brothers are finally reconciled, they compare notes. It is clear, however, that the two young men have not "solved" the case. They do not even know for certain that their father's death was murder, only that some people think this is the case (*TF* 388, 393). They seem to agree, though, that Justice Stroughton Howell bears a certain amount of moral responsibility (*TF* 389). The final piece of the puzzle, the identity of Dirk Burnaby's murderer, is revealed in the last chapter of Part Three, told from the point of view of Juliet. Juliet does not investigate, but her relationship with Bud Stonecrop eventually leads to her discovery of the truth (*TF* 462).

How will he die?

Previously, I discussed in detail the forward moving structure of plot in *The Tattooed Girl*. Due to the chronological progression of the narrative and the fact that murder, when it does occur, takes place only in the final pages, there is no doubt that reader interest in this case is of Todorov's "suspense" variety. This suspense is carefully put in place in Part I and maintained throughout the entire work. In Part I, Oates sets up the idea that Dmitri Meatte is a sleazy, suspicious, law breaking character: He is introduced as "a sidelong slantwise type"

like "one of those [...] deep-sea predators with lateral vision" (*TTG* 23) and we eventually learn that he had drug problems in college (*TTG* 38), carries oxycodone tablets in his pocket to use on women (*TTG* 41) and is a pimp who keeps his girls at local hotels (*TTG* 59-60). Alma[528] also has a suspicious past: Back home there are bench warrants out for her arrest though she claims to not really know what she had gotten mixed up in (*TTG* 57).

The notion is placed in the mind of the reader that Dmitri wants to somehow victimize Seigl, who appears as his mediator in terms of the anthropological philosopher René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. According to Girard, all desire is imitation, the result of a triangular relationship. The object of desire is originally presented to us as desirable through a mediator, though we resist this realisation and insist on viewing our desire as a direct line between object and self. As the desiring subject is convinced of the spontaneity of his desire, he can feel jealous of and hate for the mediator who is viewed as a rival for the desired object, in this case, prestige and social standing.[529] Dmitri is described as having conflicting feelings about Seigl, at times hating him – "Yes, Dmitri hated this man: hated serving him, accepting his lavish tips, having to be grateful and having to like him" (*TTG* 34) – at others admiring him – "For Dmitri did admire Joshua Seigl, in fact. You had to admire the man whatever you thought of the race" (*TTG* 36). Though, ultimately, the hatred seems to win out as Dmitri considers Seigl looks "like a man [...] waiting for his pocket to be picked" (*TTG* 40) and vows "he'd get his revenge on the Jew, someday" (*TTG* 42).

Seigl's health problems have also been introduced: "Exactly what was wrong with Seigl hadn't yet been determined but it was now likely that he was suffering, at age thirty-eight, the onslaught of one of those mysterious 'nerve diseases' after all" (*TTG* 69). Finally, these three characters have all become connected by Seigl's spontaneous offer, in the last

[528] When the tattooed girl character is initially introduced on page 21 she is presented only as "Alma," no last name is given, and this remains the case throughout all of Part I. Her last name is finally communicated on page 84 at the beginning of Part II when she presents herself at Seigl's residence to begin work as his new assistant. Alma has been given a new identity, a certain worth, which is transmitted textually by the use of her last name.
[529] René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1961).

lines of Part I, to employ Alma as his assistant (*TTG* 79). Thus, by the end of Part I, the "suspense" machine has been set in motion; the groundwork has been laid for something to go terribly wrong in the following pages. The reader is interested to know what will happen to the characters. Will Dmitri Meatte be able to get "revenge" on Seigl? He apparently resents the man's wealth. Will Alma become "good" working in the shadow of Seigl? Will she get the best of Dmitri Meatte or vice versa? Will Seigl recover from his illness or will it ultimately have a degenerative effect on his life? Hopefully, Alma will leave her seedy life behind and Seigl's invitation will serve as a way for both of them to be redeemed. To summarize, suspense in this novel is initially created through two "causes": Seigl's unidentified illness and Alma's and Dmitri's seedy natures. The reader wonders what the "effects" will be. It seems highly unlikely that the two elements can add up to a happy ending.

However, like the amorphous links between events discussed in relation to *Rape: A Love Story*, the chain of cause and effect is complicated in *The Tattooed Girl* by the issue of Seigl's health. The effects of Seigl's autoimmune disease are not entirely clear. What developments should be attributed to the disease? What would have happened anyway in spite of it? The neurologist has not been able to identify his affliction. Seigl's sister, Jet, accuses him of bringing his physical condition upon himself, saying:

> Denial is a form of hysteria, like catatonia. You're deeply into denial, Joshua. Your career is in tatters and you don't seem to care. This 'autoimmune' condition: it's your own self turning against you. But in destroying yourself you're destroying others, too. The memory of our family. Our heritage. (*TTG* 138)

Throughout Part II Seigl's health gradually deteriorates. For example, he has more and more difficulty negotiating "the nineteen stone steps" up to his front door and must either "ask his assistant to help him" or swallow "his pride" and enter "the house by way of the side, rear door" where "there were only three or four steps, and no one likely to observe if, on a bad day, Joshua Seigl leaned heavily on his cane and dragged himself up like a bundle of sodden

laundry" (*TTG* 146). The immediate effect of this in terms of plot is that Alma Busch "moved into the guest room on the ground floor of Seigl's house. For now she was a full-time assistant to the man" (*TTG* 147). Interestingly, in terms of the discussion of causes and effects, Seigl poses a related question to his neurologist after his initial tests: "But if it's a 'nerve disease,' what causes it?," he asks, adding, "diseases have causes, surely" (*TTG* 44). The doctor's response is vague and inconclusive: "The neurologist told him that numerous causes have been suspected. But no single cause has yet been isolated" (*TTG* 44). This might be read as a rebuttal to the notion that all things happen for a reason, fitting into a causal chain. Some things just happen; they cannot be attributed to a specific source.

Alma Busch's character is more fully developed in Part II, particularly around the notion of her intense hatred for her employer. Alma seems incapable of nuancing her emotions or of varying her vocabulary much. Her feelings and modes of expression are limited to extremes. Chapter 10 is told from Alma's perspective, enumerating all the reasons for which she hates Joshua Seigl with repetitive use of the word "hate":

> 1) "Like liquid flame in her veins was the Tattooed Girl's hatred of her employer. The Tattooed Girl was one to hate her employers male or female but now the insult to the injury was, this fucker's a *Jew*." (*TTG* 148)
> 2) "Mostly that was why she hated him. Because he didn't know what he owned. [...] She hated him because he had money. Because he had money and didn't even spend it!" (*TTG* 152)
> 3) "After the weekend, returning to the house on the Hill it seemed she hated her employer more than ever!" (*TTG* 154)
> 4) "*Hate hate hate him* twice as much now for he reminded Alma of the sister and since the sister's departure there was beginning to be a weakness in the man." (*TTG* 157-158)
> 5) "That quiet voice of his. She hated such weakness!" (*TTG* 159)
> 6) "*Hate hate hate the Jew* because she caught him looking at her with pity." (*TTG* 160)
> 7) "Hating the man for his weakness. Any weakness. But most of all she hated this employer for giving her orders in his prissy backward way." (*TTG* 160)

This intense hatred seems to be linked above all to social status and power relations, and the history of the region Alma grew up in. In a previous chapter (chapter 6, pages 142-144), also told from her point of view, it is described as a hellish place. We learn that Alma comes from

"Akron County" in the "State of Pennsylvania" where fires are raging in the mines and which was declared a "Hazardous Area" in 1983.[530] "In Akron Valley there'd been no Jews, not a one." However, Alma's hatred of Jews is learned from childhood. The people of Akron Valley blame their hardships on the Jews: "If you traced it back far enough, not whose names were on the mines but who actually owned the mines, these were banks, the international conspiracy of Jew-banks, you'd discover it's Jews. She had not needed Dmitri Meatte to tell her about Jews" (*TTG* 100). She did, however, need Dmitri to tell her that Seigl was a Jew as she speculates she would not have known otherwise: "She could not have said if it was Mr. Seigl's Jew-ness she hated, or hating him, and knowing he was a Jew, that was why. Which came first. Maybe she'd never have guessed he was a Jew except Dmitri made so much of it" (*TTG* 150).

Dmitri is presented as a character with a deep, controlling influence over Alma Busch. Not only is he responsible for identifying Seigl to Alma as a Jew and thus orienting all of her pent up hatred towards her employer, his influence is so deep that he can use her in any way he pleases – even as a sexual favor to be passed "along to his asshole friends" (*TTG* 188) – without fearing her rebellion. Though Alma realizes that she no longer "needs" Dmitri economically now that she has a well-paying job, she cannot help feeling that she loves him: "She was in love, had to be. Christ she knew the symptoms. Wanting to die. Like kicking a junkie habit clawing screaming puking your guts out" (*TTG* 98). No matter that "he'd sold her more than once and betrayed her" and "kicked her out as of no use to him," Alma decides to beg for forgiveness, reasoning: "Men were impressed by devotion, loyalty. A man might be cruel but if you show your trust he will relent" (*TTG* 99). In fact, Alma only knows how to "love" in the context of a victim/abuser relationship, learned behavior from her family

[530] These "facts" belong to the world of the novel. In terms of geographic location in reality, Akron, PA seems to be confused with Akron, OH. On page 143 we read that it is "eighty miles to Pittsburgh" from Alma's region. As Pittsburgh is near the western border of Pennsylvania and Akron, PA is on the eastern side of the state, it would seem that Alma's Akron would have to be the one in Ohio. But the novel locates it in Pennsylvania. There is a discrepancy between the geography of the novel and the geography of the real world outside it.

experience growing up: "How many times she'd seen it. In her own family she had seen it." For this reason, she interprets Dmitri's "fury" and abuse as love: "So she had reason to think there was hope. In Dmitri's eyes, in his fury that meant he cared for her, there was the connection between them" (*TTG* 100). In her effort to get back into Dmitri's good graces, Alma even proposes to seduce Seigl in order to facilitate stealing from him (*TTG* 103). Finally, in Chapter 14 (the penultimate chapter in Part II) Dmitri asks Alma to "see if the Jew owns a gun" (*TTG* 185). She looks through the house and then reports back: "Telling him she guessed Seigl wasn't a man to own firearms. You could sort of figure that by looking at him" (*TTG* 186). However, in spite of this, we are left with the feeling that Dmitri must be planning some kind of big action against Seigl, robbery or kidnapping, perhaps. Interestingly, the text makes no statement about whether Alma did or did not find a gun. Two possibilities present themselves. Either she did not find a gun during her search which is why she made the report she did to Dmitri or she did find a gun and decided to dissimulate its presence in the house. In the final lines of Part II, Seigl arrives home "at about 3 A.M." calling for Alma to help him: "The Tattooed Girl hurried to put on her coat, her boots. She laughed to herself. She was excited, nervous. She guessed the *remission* had ended" (*TTG* 194). She appears to enjoy the fact that Seigl needs her. Is this because it means he will be easier to control and keep tabs on or is Alma gradually moving over to her employer's side?

The idea that Alma wants to kill Seigl is introduced in Part III of the text. She runs down a hefty list of motives for wanting to kill her employer:

> Now that she'd hardened her heart against Joshua Seigl, reasons came to her for what she would do. Like a court trial it was. The verdict was handed down: GUILTY. Now you needed to see why it was just. And the death sentence was just. (*TTG* 208)

At the top of the list is revenge for her family, victimized by the "rich banker-Jews who'd shut down the mines of Akron Valley"; this would earn her father's forgiveness if he could know about it (*TTG* 205). Seigl's rudeness towards her is another reason (*TTG* 208). Then

there is neglect and humiliation: "The worst insult had been the night of Seigl's birthday party" (*TTG* 209). Upon this occasion, Alma was not allowed to serve food, only to clear and dry dishes and she was reprimanded for stacking plates (*TTG* 211). On top of this, Seigl never called for her or asked about her: "And at the birthday party when everybody was so happy, the Tattooed Girl was put in her place like a kicked dog. Never would she forget that insult. Like a dull hurting back molar, its roots deep in her jaw" (*TTG* 228). Finally, there are the scoldings she receives for the way she answers the phone: "Seigl had scolded her for this very failing in the past. In her heart cursing *I hate you! I will kill you*" (*TTG* 233). Alma even voices her intention to Dmitri and some of his friends while dancing at "a party across the river," saying "'I'm gonna! I'm gonna do it! Kill the Jew! One of these days! He provokes me, I'm gonna!'" (*TTG* 206). These urges gradually materialize into concrete actions, beginning with the failed crushed glass in the casserole incident (*TTG* 202). This is followed by various other attempts to harm him that have already been enumerated in a previous section.

Alma's malice is not the only threat to her employer's life, however. Two other factors also menace Seigl's well-being: his illness and his sister. His physical condition continues to degenerate with the evolution of his neurodegenerative disease as attested to by the changes that have occurred in various characteristics of the household: "The wheelchair that had been rented had now been purchased and was kept in a corner of Seigl's new bedroom. A ramp was being built at the rear of the house, where it would not be visible from the sidewalk"; "In the spring friends came to visit her employer more often, for he left the house less frequently" (*TTG* 232). Seigl's illness is finally diagnosed and his doctor "told him at last the medical term – the 'name' – of his illness" (*TTG* 236). However, the "name" is never communicated in the text. The only clues to what the illness might be are in the effects and treatments we are told about and the fact that Seigl eventually "decided to undergo a radical chemotherapy treatment his neurologist had suggested to 'halt the progress' of his deteriorating condition"

(*TTG* 261). The third threat to the man's life is represented by a piece of hate mail he receives (coincidentally, he thinks, though perhaps not) on the day of his diagnosis containing:

> a first edition copy of *The Shadows* that had been badly waterstained, torn and gouged-at as if with a knife. The jacket cover, a twilight rural scene two-thirds darkened earth and one-third pale sky, had been scrawled over in red crayon – or was it lipstick? / JEW HATER JEW (*TTG* 236-237)

These last three words seem to Seigl like "a Zen koan of a curse" (*TTG* 237). The vandalized book turns out to be the very copy of the book that Seigl had inscribed and presented to his beloved sister, Jet. Receipt of this mutilated book makes Seigl realize that his sister hates him: "The savage assault from Jet had shocked Seigl, yet allowed him the luxury of knowing, rare in his life, that someone hated him. No doubt his sister was deranged, yet her hatred must seem to her pure, even righteous" (*TTG* 240). The convergence of these three threats (though Seigl himself is only aware of two of them) makes it seem by the end of Part III, Chapter 9 – a chapter wherein he receives both his diagnosis and his hate mail – that his death is inevitable, destined. The question seems to be exactly how it will come about. Which of these menaces will get him first? In any event, the ultimate question which emerges is not whether or not the man will die, but how it will occur. Concerning this character's life or death, it is simply a matter of a race against time. Will his illness get him from within before an exterior source gets him from without?

However, Oates, at every turn, thwarts the expectations she has set up in her reader. In the second half of Part III, things actually start looking up. Seigl is optimistic, lecturing and publishing again (*TTG* 238-239). Dmitri has disappeared. Though Alma looks for him, he is nowhere to be found (*TTG* 253-254). Alma and Seigl have a discussion about Seigl's "Jewishness" and he explains that he is not, in fact, really a Jew (*TTG* 255-260). Seigl is hospitalized for "radical chemotherapy treatment" and Alma keeps vigil by his side (*TTG* 267-273). When Seigl finally starts feeling better, he attributes his newfound health to Alma's devotion (*TTG* 274). Alma's attitude towards Seigl has changed and when Dmitri finally

shows up again, she sends him away (*TTG* 275-277). In the penultimate chapter, Seigl, home from the hospital, gives Alma a necklace that had belonged to his mother and plans to take her to Rome with him in the fall (*TTG* 278-279). Perhaps Seigl will be spared?

Seigl does die. However, when the end finally comes for him at the end of Part III, it is due to neither of the three menaces previously described, rather to a simple heart attack brought on by overexertion during his recovery: "On the morning of May 19, five days after he'd been discharged from the hospital, and improving rapidly each day, Seigl became restless and insisted upon hiking in Mount Carmel Cemetery, where he hadn't been in months" (*TTG* 280). He persists in vigorously climbing up a high flight of steep stone steps built into the hill and makes it to the top much in advance of his assistant:

> At the top of the hill, Seigl turned aside as if stricken by a new thought. Alma, craning her neck, called out, 'Mr. Seigl - ?' She hurriedly climbed the rest of the way. One of the steps was loose, her foot nearly slipped. There was a smell of lush, damp grass on all sides. Something was wrong here, something was jeering and mocking. When Alma reached the top of the steps there was Seigl hunched over, pressing the palm of his hand against his chest. She tried to take hold of his arm but he pushed her away without seeing her. His face was contorted, almost unrecognizable. She cried his name, she asked what was wrong, she was overcome with panic trying to hold him but he pushed away from her, stumbling, livid with pain. As Alma stared in horror she saw him lose his balance and fall backward down the steps, heavily, like a dead weight, onto the hilly ground thirty feet below where he lay broken and still as if already dead.

At this moment in the story, Seigl is not yet dead. But the "as if already dead" and the following "in the ambulance he was still alive" (*TTG* 283) clearly indicate that this is his fate. The death is confirmed by the opening line of Part IV: "It was a time of deep plunging sleep and when she woke each time he was still dead" (*TTG* 287).

This discussion shows that the structure of each of these works is unique. *Rape: A Love Story* combines the backward-looking structure of classic detective fiction's investigation into a crime with the forward movement of a cause to effect suspense narrative. *Beasts* uses a similar backward-looking structure, this time, however, it is combined with the

backward movement of an effect to cause curiosity model of suspense. The overall structure of *The Falls* is a forward-moving suspense narrative, however, embedded within it in Part III is a backward-looking curiosity narrative. Finally, *The Tattooed Girl* is pure thriller, a forward-moving suspense narrative. However, the structure alone is not enough to identify a work as detective fiction. The other half of the equation concerns the themes evoked.

3.8.3. Themes/Discourse

In addition to identifying differences in structure, Todorov also outlines how the classic detective story and the thriller can be distinguished thematically. The classic detective fiction sub-type is defined by a very strict adherence to a set of thematic rules originally codified in 1928 when the writer S.S. Van Dine published his twenty rules for the detective story.[531] Todorov observes a certain amount of repetition and redundancy in the set and condenses them down to eight:

> 1. The novel must have at most one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse).
> 2. The culprit must not be a professional criminal, must not be the detective, must kill for personal reasons.
> 3. Love has no place in detective fiction.
> 4. The culprit must have a certain importance:
> (a) in life: not be a butler or a chambermaid.
> (b) in the book: must be one of the main characters.
> 5. Everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted.
> 6. There is no place for descriptions nor for psychological analyses.
> 7. With regard to information about the story, the following homology must be observed: "author : reader = criminal : detective."[532]

[531] Symons' account of the rules of the genre is slightly different. He accredits Ronald Knox with setting out the following rules in 1928: the criminal must be mentioned early on, the supernatural must be ruled out, the detective must not himself commit the crime, the detective must not be helped by accident or unaccountable intuition, and every detail of the detective's thought process should be conscientiously audited. Symons writes that Willard Huntington Wright (who published detective fiction under the pseudonym S. S. Van Dine) added two more rules to the list: love interests are banned, and the detective should stand outside the action like a Greek chorus (1-2). Several other "rules" are attributed by Symons to tacit agreement: the crime in a novel-length story had to be murder; the culprit had to be a worthwhile person, not a servant, meaning he had to be from the same social group as all the other suspects and not a professional criminal; and the motives for the crime had to be personal and therefore rational (106).

[532] Author is to reader what murderer is to detective. Meaning the reader finds out what the author knows about the crime in the same way that the detective finds out what the murderer knows about the crime. The process of

8. Banal situations and solutions must be avoided. (*TT* 49)

Analyzing these rules in terms of his remarks about structure, Todorov further divides them into two groups according to which story line they govern. The first group of rules, from 1 to 4a, concern strictly thematic issues (the first story line, that of the crime), whereas the second part, from 4b to 8, deal with the level of discourse (second story line, that of the investigation). Once he has compared these rules to a description of the thriller type, he notices that the first group applies only to the classic detective story while the second group seems to be valid for any sub-type of detective fiction. This explains why Todorov can talk about a detective fiction genre made up of different types. There are qualities, on the level of discourse, that remain common to all types. Evolution within the genre has remained isolated to its thematic elements (*TT* 49-50).

Todorov refers back to his initial discussion of genre to elucidate his conception of the thriller. According to him, the thriller is an example of the previous failing of genre classification because it did not develop around a new theoretical structure, rather out of a new thematic: "Indeed it is around these few constants that the thriller is constituted: violence, generally sordid crime, the amorality of the characters." Along with the merging of the two story lines, these thematic elements distinguish the thriller from the classic detective story. They also distinguish the type from other genres such as the adventure story. In his discussion, Todorov first acknowledges the similarities between the thriller and the adventure story before enumerating several thematic elements that distinguish them from each other. He concludes that the difference in the "milieu and behavior described" was the most important in the development of the thriller sub-type (*TT* 48). The classic detective story and the thriller are different both structurally and thematically, yet it would appear, at least according to

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discovering knowledge is always related by the author to the reader in the same way/order it was discovered by the detective, whether this be after the fact (as in the puzzle story) or as the action is taking place (as in the thriller).

Todorov, that the most important defining characteristic of the classic detective story is found in its special structure and that of the thriller in its themes.

Following the above discussion of structure, it should already be abundantly clear that none of our corpus works fit the model of the classic detective story. Indeed, with the exception of *The Tattooed Girl*, perhaps, they do not even conform to the thriller model, though bearing more resemblance to it. Will a discussion of the themes and level of discourse continue to widen the gap or will it serve to bring the corpus back into a closer relationship with the detective fiction genre? Even the most cursory overview of the corpus would be enough to realize that in the themes as well, these works do not exactly correspond to the classic detective fiction model. However, let me begin with a brief look at the two works that seem to be the closest to the detective fiction model in terms of involving investigations into crimes: *Rape: A Love Story* and *The Falls*.

3.8.3.1. Justice

Rape: A Love Story has a detective as a central figure and guilty parties distinct from the detective himself and not professional criminals. However, the crime is not murder so though there is a victim, there is no cadaver. We may decide that the rules can be bent to encompass the crime of gang rape as on par with that of murder.[533] After all, the victim was near death and effectively "left to die" by the rapists who did not foresee her living to press charges against them (*RLS* 3) and an intention to cause great bodily harm is virtually indistinguishable from an intention to kill. But what about the status occupied by the guilty persons in the world of the story? They do not occupy significant social positions in this fictional Niagara Falls. Furthermore, they do not rape and leave for dead for any personal reasons more significant than a spontaneous desire for instant gratification.

[533] Murder is defined as "the killing of one human being by another with malice aforethought, either express or implied, that is, with deliberate intent or informed design to kill." *Ballentine's Law Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1969).

There remains one more element from the thematic list to be broached, the love interest. Though the title refers to the novella as a love story, it does not develop love interests between the characters in the traditional, tangible, physical sense so that, paradoxically, it is perhaps on this one point that the novella's discourse is the most closely related to that of the classic detective story. The love story referenced in the title is double. On the one hand, it refers to the love that the detective, John Dromoor, feels for Teena and Bethie, a love, as shown in Chapter 4, expressly linked with the ideas of responsibility and justice. In this way, Dromoor's implication in the outcome of the investigation and subsequent legal proceedings is not fundamentally different from the motives of any traditional literary detective who acts to re-establish the traditional order. "What crime literature offered to its readers for half a century from 1890 onwards," explains Symons, "was a reassuring world in which those who tried to disturb the established order were always discovered and punished. Society's agent [was] the detective."[534] On the other hand, the title also refers to the love that Bethie feels for John Dromoor which is activated by the realization that he is at the origin of the deaths or disappearances of the four main assailants and that through his actions, he gives back the gift of life to both her and her mother. This is a love that is perhaps fundamentally no different than any feeling of appreciation felt by a victim for the detective who solves a crime and helps bring the guilty party to justice.

However, as discussed above, those themes that are inappropriate in the context of classic detective fiction are exactly those that constitute the thriller sub-type. What of the milieu and behavior described? Violence pervades the story. Sordid crime and amoral personages abound, as shown in Chapter 4. The rapists perpetrate physical as well as psychological violence upon Teena and Bethie Maguire. Another form of psychological violence occurs in the courtroom when the defense puts forward its outrageous theories.

[534] Symons 11.

Likewise, John Dromoor's Old Testament conception of justice leads him to reciprocate through violence as well, by taking justice in to his own hands. Furthermore, it is Bethie who calls Dromoor to report the harassment by the Pick brothers, knowing that he will do something about it as he had previously done with "the first of them." Every character is implicated in some form of violence.

In the same way, the amorality element is not reserved expressly for the rapist characters. If Teena is unable to get justice for herself through legal means it is because of the amorality of the justice system which is depicted as unconcerned about right or wrong, privileging the importance of the presentation of facts and a carefully outlined and structured case.

3.8.3.2. Deadline: Crippling Effects of Lack of Knowledge

Both *Rape: A Love Story* and *The Falls* are set in Niagara Falls. The novella, the publication of which preceded that of the novel by a year, touches on issues that are developed more fully in the novel. The character Teena is described as a ghostly female apparition with "a chalky-white face" (*RLS* 79). She would "keep to herself. Walk the windy bluff at the edge of the Falls where it was always damp with spray" (*RLS* 83). This character is Oates's literary predecessor to Ariah, the widow-bride in *The Falls*. Another issue is brought up briefly that will be given an in-depth treatment in *The Falls*. In the chapter on the media in *Rape: A Love Story* Oates briefly refers to a regional problem that will be taken up in more detail in the novel: "the usual headlines concerning contaminated landfills, EPA lawsuits against local chemical factories and oil refineries" (*RLS* 128). Both works also emphasize the questionable morality of the local justice system.

The Falls is a long and complex novel. In order to discuss it in terms of detective fiction, it is necessary to isolate the central crime story line which can be summarized in the

following way. Ariah's husband Dirk is a lawyer who becomes involved in litigating the first Love Canal case. He ruffles the feathers of powerful former friends who decide to have him killed and he is run off the road into the Niagara River above The Falls by someone driving a police cruiser. His death is officially classified as an accident. Fifteen years later, his children become suspicious and begin investigating the life and death of their father. Their inquiries lead to the discovery that their father was, indeed, murdered. The story is, of course, much richer than this brief summary might lead to believe. I would assert, however, that all of the other elements belong to the realm of character development. Their role is to explain that which "links" and explains these "events."

To what extent does this story line conform to the rules of classic detective fiction? There are detectives (amateurs, the three Burnaby children), guilty parties (the police officer, Stonecrop, and Justice Stroughton Howell), though the formula specifies there should be only one of each of these, and a victim (Dirk Burnaby, though his body is never found). In addition, concerning the central story of the crime, there is no romantic love interest at work. However, the story strays where Stonecrop is concerned. He is the one who actually did the killing, but he is only a hired gun. His son, Bud, explains to Juliet:

> Him and this other guy, driving a truck. My dad was driving a police cruiser. They ran him off the highway into the river. That's how your father died, in the river. I guess you know that. Somebody wanted your father dead, see? My dad was contacted and took the job. (*TF* 462)

Stonecrop is a professional criminal as far as this event is concerned and he does not occupy an important role in the society of this fictional Niagara Falls; he is nothing but a simple police officer and not someone in a position of power.

Once again, however, these elements correspond to the thriller thematic of violence, sordid crime and amoral personages. The novel opens upon Gilbert Erskine throwing himself into The Falls. This self-inflicted violent act effectively frees Ariah from what would have most likely been an unhappy marriage. However, it ultimately leads her to a situation in

which she will lose a second husband. The litigation that Dirk Burnaby gets involved in highlights the violence inflicted on the working class by the indifference of the big chemical corporations and their white collar colleagues (judges, lawyers, etc.). His death is contracted and carried out by those who are supposed to be protecting the people; his life reduced to a mere monetary value.

Though the broad banner of "detective fiction" seems like it can apply to these works, it is difficult to discuss them in terms of the classic detective fiction and thriller sub-types as elements of both are combined in each piece of fiction. However, though they differ greatly in terms of structure, thematically they both have much in common with the thriller as outlined by Todorov.

3.8.3.3. Delicious Rottenness

The French translation of *Beasts* is entitled *Délicieuses pourritures* after the line "Delicious rottenness" in D.H. Lawrence's poem "Medlars and Sorb-Apples" and aptly describes the mental states of the protagonists involved in the unorthodox triangle of sexual exploitation. The sexual relationships portrayed in *Beasts* – young female students engaging in sexual acts not only with a male professor, but also with his wife, and at the same time – definitely place this story thematically in the realm of the sordid. Part of Lawrence's poem is also used as the novella's epigraph:

> I love you, rotten,
> Delicious rottenness.
>
> . . . wonderful are the hellish experiences,
> Orphic, delicate
> Dionysos of the Underworld.

The oxymoronic reference to wonderful hellish experiences seems to point to the amorality of the characters' actions, both those of the Harrows who have no misgivings about taking advantage of the infatuation of young women and those of the young women themselves who

have no qualms about their share of the responsibility for their friends' breakdowns. Gillian points out: "At the time of Marisa's breakdown I'd been with Dorcas and Andre Harrow in the house on Brierly Lane" (*B* 89). However, this matter of fact statement refrains from acknowledging that Marisa broke down because she was expelled from the Harrows' circle; her place there is now being occupied by her friend Gillian. This theme is carried throughout the text by the refrain "*we are beasts, this is our consolation*" (*B* 2, 13, 119) accompanied upon its first appearance by "*we are beasts, we feel no guilt.*"

On this New England college campus which seems to somehow be outside the moral order of society the characters' actions lead to innumerable instances of violence. Someone has been setting fires around campus, causing Gillian and her friends to fear they "might be 'burned alive' in [their] beds" (*B* 22). Secondly, Marisa, like Sybil before her (*B* 64), when faced with the psychological violence of rejection, will attempt to take her own life by slashing at her forearms with a razor blade (*B* 88). There is also the sexual exploitation facilitated by drugging the girls with Quaaludes (*B* 97), and finally, the general mental indifference to the psychological well-being of others.

3.8.3.4. Nemesis

The title of Part III of *The Tattooed Girl*, "Nemesis," effectively sums up the overarching thematic of the novel. *Webster's* dictionary defines it as:

> **1a** one that inflicts retribution. **b** one that avenges relentlessly or destroys inevitably. **c** a formidable and usually victorious rival or opponent.
> **2a** an act or effect of retributive justice. **b** an inevitable result.[535]

Moreover, Nemesis is the Greek goddess of divine retribution who punishes such things as the excess of pride, undeserved happiness and the absence of moderation. The question this

[535] "Nemesis," def. 1-2, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981).

word begs us to explore is who or what is the "nemesis" referred to in the paratext, and in relation to whom?

As Seigl is the one who ends up dead at the end of Part III, the first thought that comes to mind is that the "nemesis" represents Seigl's downfall, the heart attack causing him, literally, to fall backwards down a flight of steep stairs to his death. But is this death deserved? Upon further reflection, perhaps the word "nemesis" has more meaning in reference to Alma's own ruin: she feared the death of her employer because she knew that it would once more relegate her to the oblivion of the streets. In this case, Seigl's death is Alma's nemesis, and not the other way around. Or, could Seigl's illness be a nemesis for both him and his employee? More likely, of course, is that the idea refers to all of these multiple meanings at once.

Certainly neither Seigl nor Alma is completely innocent and undeserving of retribution. Alma's crimes – her attempts to bring bodily harm to her employer – have already been discussed; however, by the end of Part III, she seems to have repented and changed her outlook. Seigl's "crimes" are also numerous, though they are only sins on a moral level, so of a different nature than Alma's. His character might be read as a prime example of excessive pride. Within the first few pages we learn that "Seigl was a large bewhiskered gregarious-seeming man who in fact prized his independence, even his aloneness." He is described as "self-sustaining," "self-sufficient," a writer who had "never applied for a grant" and "never accepted a permanent teaching position at a university" because he did not want it to distract him from writing (*TTG* 5). Seigl's intellectual superiority cuts him off from and blinds him in part to the states of being of those who do not share his enlightenment. He never picks up on either Dmitri's or Alma's hatred and thus is unable to read how they perceive certain of his actions to be personally insulting. However, he, like Alma, has changed by the end of Part III.

He has acknowledged Alma's role in his recovery and has welcomed her into a more important place in his life. Might this be read as "undeserved happiness"?

In fact, in an odd sort of mirroring or doubling effect, Seigl and Alma turn out to each be at once the other's downfall and the agent of that downfall. Thus, Alma's own death in Part IV, at the hands of yet another nemesis, seems inevitable. This theme of multiple nemeses in *The Tattooed Girl* is intimately linked to the thematics of the thriller sub-type in that it leads to acts of violence and sordid crime in a way that brings to light the amorality of the characters. The milieu described is one in which each character fends for himself and fine-tunes his behavior accordingly.

3.8.3.5. Absence of Supernatural

As we saw at the beginning of this section, Todorov makes a distinction between thematic elements and elements of discourse. This is an astute distinction which allows him to observe that one set changes while the other remains stable. Of course, the two groups are interconnected. *Webster's* dictionary defines "discourse" as "the expression of ideas; esp: formal and orderly expression in speech or writing."[536] "Theme" is defined as "a subject or topic on which one speaks or writes."[537] Thus, thematic elements are a subset of discourse in a similar relationship to that of thriller sub-type and detective fiction genre.

Of those elements on the "rules of the genre" list which Todorov identifies as belonging to the level of discourse, number 5 – forbidding recourse to irrational, fantastic explanations – is perhaps the most important. Indeed, François Gallix reminds us in his overview article on forms of detective fiction of the important relationship between detective fiction and historical discourse. Gallix discusses the ideas of Charles Grivel who pointed out in a 1967 lecture that detective fiction imitates History in order to achieve credibility and

[536] "Discourse," def. 4a, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981).
[537] "Theme," def. 1a, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981).

therefore seeks to distance itself from novelistic writing: "detective fiction [...] sought to imitate History, as a means to gain credibility and to assert its relationship to the real world as opposed to the fictional realm."[538] This is linked, of course, with Todorov's idea that in order for the author of a classic detective story to offer up the guise of credibility to his reader it was necessary to make it clear that the narrator was indeed engaged in the process of writing a story. Grivel takes this idea even further, pointing out that the detective fiction story is credible when it effectively portrays itself as based in History, masking its fictional qualities. Gallix summarizes: "It is a game which involves believing and making others believe that everything is true."[539] In other words, detective fiction loses its effectiveness if the reader does not believe it to be real. The supernatural, therefore, has no place in detective fiction. This important requirement is, indeed, met by Oates in the four corpus works with the possible exception, as discussed in Chapter 7, of the woman-in-black episode in *The Falls*. However, even this scene does not break the code because it remains, as I have shown, a truly "fantastic" occurrence in the sense of Todorov's analysis of the fantastic as the moment of hesitation. It is impossible to say for sure whether the woman in black is a supernatural visitor or a figment of Royall's imagination.

3.8.4. Suspense Story

The qualification of the two types of detective fiction discussed thus far – classic detective fiction and thrillers – cannot be attributed to Todorov. They have been widely acknowledged, discussed and theorized. Todorov's originality in "Typology of Detective Fiction" lies in the fact that he establishes similarities between them at the level of discourse

[538] François Gallix, "Formes du roman de détection: quelques approches de la critique moderne," *Americana* 13 (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1996) 19. My translation: "le roman policier [...] cherchait à imiter l'Histoire, dans un souci de crédibilité et pour s'affirmer comme ancré dans le réel et non pas dans le romanesque."
[539] My translation of: "Il s'agit en fait d'un jeu qui consiste à croire et à faire croire que tout est vrai." Gallix, "Formes du roman de détection" 19.

and in his suggestion that a third type exists which combines the qualities of the two others and which he calls the "suspense novel." He explains:

> It keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present; but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth. As in the thriller, it is this second story which here occupies the central place. (*TT* 50)

This form combines both types of reader interest. The reader is both curious to have past events explained and anxious to find out what will happen to the main characters. The mystery element is maintained in the suspense novel, but its function has shifted: "Mystery has a function different from the one it had in the whodunit: it is actually a point of departure, the main interest deriving from the second story, the one taking place in the present" (*TT* 51).

Todorov identifies two sub-types of suspense novel. He refers to the first as "the story of the vulnerable detective" and puts forward the novels of Hammett and Chandler as examples.[540] These novels are often classified as thrillers because of the "milieu" they describe, yet Todorov sees a clear distinction because the mystery element still remains, though it is no longer the central element around which everything else revolves.

The second sub-type of suspense novel is what Todorov names "the story of the suspect-as-detective." This type leaves the milieu of the professional criminal to return to that of the individual crime of the classic detective story, handled, however, in terms of the new structure:

> In this case, a crime is committed in the first pages and all the evidence in the hands of the police points to a certain person (who is the main character). In order to prove his innocence, this person must himself find the real culprit, even if he risks his life in doing so. We might say that, in this case, this character is at the same time the detective, the culprit (in the eyes of the police), and the victim (potential victim of the real murderers). (*TT* 51)

[540] Cynthia Hamilton considers "the Western and hard-boiled detective novels as 'subgenres'" which "can be subsumed under the American adventure formula, or 'master formula.'" According to Hamilton, "there are two crucial elements in the setting of the master formula: lawlessness and the maximum opportunity for personal enrichment. These two characteristics make the setting the best possible proving-ground for the individualistic values of the American ideology." *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America: From High Noon to Midnight* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987) 2. It would appear that what Hamilton is calling the "hard-boiled detective novel" encompasses both Todorov's "thriller" and "suspense novel" categories. I have chosen to use Todorov's more precise appellations.

The main elements of Todorov's typology are summarized in the following table:

Sub-Type	Themes/Discourse	Structure
Classic Detective Story	• Genre rules: 1 to 4a (theme) 1. detective, murderer, victim 2. murderer not professional or detective 3. no love interest 4. a. murderer must have important position in life of story • Genre rules: 4b to 8 (discourse) 4. b. murderer must be one of main characters 5. rational explanation, no fantastic elements 6. no descriptions or psychological analysis 7. author : reader = murderer : detective 8. avoid banal situations and solutions	• Presence of two story lines: past/fable (crime) and present/subject (investigation) • Backward-looking • Gradual process of discovery, putting together of clues • Interest: curiosity
Thriller	• Thematic genre rules do not apply • Genre rules: 4b to 8 (discourse rules) • Violence, sordid crimes, amoral characters	• Story lines: narration and action coincide (no mystery element) • Forward-looking • Interest: suspense
Suspense Novel • Story of vulnerable detective • Story of suspect-as-detective	• Same as for thriller	• Two story lines, but second has a larger role • Interest: both types at once

As this chapter has shown, none of the corpus works, though appearing at first glance to resemble detective fiction, correspond precisely to either the classic detective story or thriller model. *The Tattooed Girl* is basically a thriller though it is unusual for no murder to take place until the very end and there is no detective character. We might expect the other three works, then, to find their place in Todorov's suspense novel category, a mixture of the other two more clear-cut types. Certainly, as we have seen in our discussions of structure and mystery element, they all employ textual strategies that create some degree of suspense interest in the reader. This alone, however, is not enough. Todorov's suspense novel category

explicitly also contains, to some degree or another, the element of a past mystery that someone is seeking to elucidate.

We might postulate John Dromoor from *Rape: A Love Story* as a vulnerable detective. There is always the possibility that one of his "justice" killings might backfire and he end up injured or apprehended. Indeed, he risks his career if his vigilante actions are discovered by authorities. The incident surrounding the killing of the first rapist attests to this. After shooting James DeLucca "in alleged self-defense" Dromoor was investigated by internal affairs.

> The shooting was widely reported in area newspapers and on TV. Much was made of the fact that the dead man was scheduled to be tried on charges of rape and aggravated assault along with several others in what was locally called the boathouse rape case. (*RLS* 101)

"There was a civilian witness to corroborate [Droomor's] statement [of self-defense]," however, and he "was not penalized beyond thirty days' desk assignment" (*RLS* 101, 102). But surely, were he to be linked to the deaths of other suspects, things would not go so well for him in spite of the fact that "the older detectives liked [him]" and he was rapidly progressing in the force (*RLS* 102, 103). However, as we have seen, in terms of structure, the prerequisite first story line is nonexistent. The reader knows the details of the crime from the very beginning.

Are there any other potential vulnerable detectives? What about the Burnaby children in *The Falls*? Both story lines exist in this novel. Are they risking their lives in investigating their father's past? The reader already knows that Dirk Burnaby was killed because of his involvement in a lawsuit implicating certain powerful members of the Niagara Falls establishment. It is clear that even in the present of Part III, more than fifteen years later, many people are uncomfortable at the thought of Chandler and Royall digging around in their father's past. Chandler "tried to speak with" almost everyone having any connection to his father and the lawsuit – including expert witnesses, Judge Stroughton Howell and Chief of

Police Fitch – but almost everyone was either "incommunicado" or outright refused to see him (*TF* 376). Two of the five people that do agree to talk to him express the opinion that Judge Howell was "obviously biased," the "witnesses were under pressure" from the mob, and that Dirk's death was ordered by "the bastards," meaning big business interests (*TF* 380, 385). Might these interests still be intent on keeping their involvement in the death a secret to the extent that Chandler and Royall might be putting their own lives at peril? This never seems to be an issue in the novel and can be summed up in Neil Lattimore's comment to Chandler: "The bastards killed him. You'll never prove it, though" (*TF* 385). If there is no way to prove anything, those involved do not have to fear exposure. Indeed, it turns out there really is no way to prove anything. Even once Bud tells Juliet that it was his dad who killed her father there is no way to know who ordered the job as Sergeant Stonecrop is suffering from severe dementia brought on by the final stages of syphilis.

That leaves us with the case of Gillian in *Beasts*. *Beasts* has certain elements of both story lines. However, the situation is complicated by the fact that Gillian is the first person narrator of events with which she is intimately involved. Depending upon how we decide to "read" her, we might find in her character elements of either the vulnerable detective or the suspect-as-detective. Nevertheless, her status as a "detective" at all is arguable as I will discuss in the discussion of detective characters in the next chapter.

It is now fully apparent that none of the corpus works correspond precisely to any of the detective fiction sub-types laid out by Todorov, though they share the hybrid quality of what he identifies as the suspense novel and thematically resemble the thriller or suspense novel sub-types. At this point, we might be prompted to ask several questions. Is there a problem with Todorov's typology? If not, are these works by Oates really detective fiction? Fortunately, Todorov makes no claim for the rigidity of his system and acknowledges the

possible existence of other detective fiction forms as well as the possibility of evolution within the genre.

Part of Todorov's essay is devoted to a discussion of whether the different types he has described are distinct steps in an evolution or whether they can all exist simultaneously. He concludes that though they "can" and do coexist, there has indeed been an evolution "in its broad outlines." This leads him to suggest that there is a certain point at which writers of the genre no longer wish to comply with the constraints that define it and decide to do away with them to develop a new code. In his final paragraph, Todorov asks how one should treat those novels that do not correspond to his classification. He acknowledges that many of the novels he has described may be perceived as occupying the gray area between detective fiction and regular novel. He concludes that his theory describes a process, not a static set of properties, and therefore allows for the development of new types or sub-types in the future, because "the new genre is not necessarily constituted by the negation of the main feature of the old, but from a different complex of properties, not by necessity logically harmonious with the first form" (*TT* 52).

Another difficulty with the study of genre raised by Todorov has to do with what he considers to be a distinction between literary masterpieces (*le chef-d'oeuvre littéraire habituel*) and masterpieces of popular literature (*le chef-d'oeuvre de la littérature de masses*) (*TT* 43). Each literary masterpiece, he writes, effectively creates a new genre that is uniquely its own, whereas the masterpiece of popular literature is that which exactly conforms to the model of a pre-existing genre which it is trying to imitate. Indeed, Todorov claims that an author who wishes to "embellish" upon the detective fiction genre ends up creating "literature" and not "detective fiction." According to him, there can be no "masterpieces" of popular literature, only specimens that perfectly conform to all the rules of a genre, of which no criticism can be

made. We therefore apply different aesthetic norms to "literary" art (sometimes referred to as "high" art) and "popular art" (*TT* 43-44).

Cynthia Hamilton, in her introduction to *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America*, takes issue with the distinction between high art and popular culture, arguing its unjustness. She complains that "while high art is defined in terms of its most successful examples, popular culture is defined in terms of its lowest common denominator" and suggests that formula literature should be treated no differently than, should not be considered a lesser cousin to, other literature which may be considered "higher," pointing out that all literature makes use of conventions, just different ones and in different ways: "Formula literature is not a special case: one needs the same skills to write it well as for any other form of literature; one needs the same skills to criticise it; and one should take into account the same kinds of social factors in both cases."[541] Accepting this argument effectively neutralizes the problem created by Todorov's distinction and frees us up to analyze the context and content of the works rather than getting bogged down in a discussion of their literary merit.

"Detective fiction" in the Todorovian typology, if we simplify the overall genre down to the essential, is always fiction concerning a crime and a detective character (whether professional, amateur, or ordinary citizen engaged in the act of detecting). The difference between the types comes from the relationship of the detective to the crime (Does he arrive after the fact and detect from afar or is he present in the action as it unfolds?). When defined so broadly, it is easy to see the affinity between the genre and our corpus. *Rape: A Love Story*, *The Falls* and *Beasts* all involve crimes and some manner of detecting. Only *The Tattooed Girl* still seems set apart, dealing as it does with the events leading up to a cold-blooded murder that closes the story, the event narrated for the reader so there is no need for a detective or an investigation. However, a comment in the second-to-last paragraph of

[541] Hamilton 3, 5.

Todorov's essay where he discusses the evolution of the genre, adds nuance to his subdivision: "The suspense novel, which appeared after the great years of the thriller, experienced this milieu as a useless attribute, and retained only the suspense itself" (*TT* 52). In light of this, it seems that there is indeed some precedent for considering this Oates corpus in terms of detective fiction, including the initially problematic *The Tattooed Girl*. Certainly suspense is created in the novel around the expectation that a crime will be committed.

Beyond the simple question of whether or not these works may or may not be considered detective fiction, it is interesting that it takes such a thorough discussion before even an attempt may be made at a statement on the matter. This should be evidence enough to convey that it is not a clearcut issue and there will certainly be dissenters to take issue with my analysis. It should now be apparent that what is most intriguing here is not in what ways the works correspond to detective fiction but rather in what ways they do not, in order to answer the question "Why create something that appears on the surface one way but is in fact something else?"

Hamilton's analysis of the hard-boiled detective story leads her to develop a theory of what she calls a "layering of contexts." The suspense novel in her view is composed of a simple layering of two contexts: that of the American adventure formula with the mystery plot of the classic detective story.[542] Her conception of this "layering-process" leads her to conclude that "formula literature is not linear; it does not operate on one level. The interplay between the layers [...] explains both the continuity and the adaptability of formula, and shows how different generic traditions can interact to produce new patterns."[543] Oates certainly produces new patterns of crime-related fiction. Subsequent chapters will explore the ramifications of this.

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[542] In my summary of Hamilton's argument I have used Todorov's terminology. Hamilton uses the term "hard-boiled detective story" to refer to what Todorov identifies as the suspense novel and the term "classical mystery" for what Todorov calls the "whodunit" or classic detective story (45-46).
[543] Hamilton 48-49.

It would appear that reflection about detective fiction underwent a period of reductive thinking. It is interesting to observe that Van Dine's rules do not correspond to the content of the Dupin stories, commonly considered to be the first proper detective stories. Though these three stories do all include the character of the detective engaged in acts of ratiocination, the puzzle to be solved is not necessarily murder or even physical aggression and the goal is not necessarily the establishment of the identity of a criminal ("The Purloined Letter"). The same can be said for many of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories as well. This being the case, we might ask ourselves whether "detective fiction" must necessarily involve an actual detective actively attempting to solve a violent crime or might it engage in thinking about the elucidation of mystery from some other angle? The next chapter will take a closer look at the process of detecting in order to better discern the nature of the mysterious phenomena with which the characters are occupied.

Chapter IX
Detection, Detecting and Detectives

"Detective fiction and psychoanalysis are two of the most powerful and popular discourses to emerge in the nineteenth century." Thus begins the introduction to Alexander N. Howe's *It Didn't Mean Anything: A Psychoanalytic Reading of American Detective Fiction*. He unsurprisingly goes on to attribute the founding of detective fiction to Poe and the founding of psychoanalysis to Freud and acknowledges that "the similarity of these two practices has long been a topic of critical interest."[544] Freud himself, during the early period of his career, seemed to acknowledge "the similarity between analysis and detection" as both seek "the 'truth' that lies beyond deceptive coverings."[545] However, Freud revised his original theories about the role of the analyst: "as Freud quickly discovered, the presumption that there is a definitive solution to the mystery plaguing the analysand actually hinders analysis and, ultimately, therapeutic effects." Howe claims that "within the history of detective fiction, a similar revision of investigative practices is found" which is illustrated by "the passage from the classical detective text, typified by the work of Poe and Conan Doyle, to the work of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction."[546] The hard-boiled detective is no longer a "master" and cannot necessarily provide a definitive answer to a given problem.

The aim of this chapter is to take a closer work at the act of detecting in order to get a better idea of the kinds of problems facing Oates's detectives. What "truths" are they trying to uncover? What sort of "answer" are they able to provide for their problem? The pertinence of these questions is intimately linked to the idea of the social function of detective fiction.

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[544] Alexander N. Howe, *It Didn't Mean Anything: A Psychoanalytic Reading of American Detective Fiction* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008) 1.
[545] Howe 2.
[546] Howe 3.

3.9.1. Social Function of Detective Fiction

Though the various sub-types of detective fiction as outlined by Todorov can and do exist simultaneously in a given period, critics agree there has been a chronological evolution in the broad outlines of the genre with the classic detective story gradually giving way to the new thriller and suspense novel forms. The succession of these forms is related to the fact that detective fiction is a reflection of cultural phenomena, and cultural phenomena are not a diachronically fixed set. Symons points out that the popularity of detective fiction at its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century was closely tied to cultural developments taking place at the time, such as: "the rise in Britain and America of a middle class with increasing leisure, the spread of reading, and the development of detective forces in several countries."[547] As detective departments and bureaus began to be established, the middle class was very thankful and this was reflected in the popular literature of the period which portrayed a detective "as the protector of established society."[548] Prior to this, Symons points out, stories about crime had served "as a form of radical social protest." In works by Godwin, Lytton and Balzac, for example, "the criminal is seen as a hero, or a victim of social injustice."[549]

Thus, over the course of the nineteenth century, the criminal hero protesting against social injustice gave way to the Great Detective hero who worked to uphold the status quo. However, early twentieth century historical events called into question the effectiveness of this latter figure. After WWII "the crime story was never quite the same," explains Symons, as it became apparent that the Great Detective no longer occupied a relevant place in society: "In a symbolic sense [he] had failed to prevent the War and in a realistic one appeared more absurd as scientific and forensic aids to detection became more refined and more

[547] Symons 38.
[548] Symons 42.
[549] Symons 283.

important."[550] A new sort of crime story was needed that could account for the alienation felt by man inhabiting the impersonal cities of the postwar period. Cynthia Hamilton discusses the role of the new hard-boiled hero:

> Where the classical detective faces a fairly well-defined task, the private eye is confronted with an ambiguous one; often his assigned task is only tangentially related to the real job he finds he must do. The difference in setting between the two genres further complicates the investigator's task. In the classical mystery, the society is portrayed as a generally stable affair where the crime or series of crimes is an aberration. The hard-boiled detective, on the other hand, is set against a society in turmoil where the crime or crimes are symptomatic of the general corruption and lawlessness. Thus the task of the detective becomes obscured by the general lawlessness.[551]

The detective's task is not the only part of the formula affected by the turbulent society against which the thriller form is set. The revelation of guilt is also transformed:

> While the classical mystery tends to narrow the circle of guilt from a wide range of suspects to a single culprit, the hard-boiled detective story presents an expanding concept of guilt. Although there is generally a main culprit, a wide and representative sample of characters are also implicated for their participation in the endemic lawlessness and corruption. Thus the hard-boiled detective story, unlike the classical mystery, has the potential to act as social criticism.[552]

To summarize the above discussion, from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries detective fiction in broad terms evolved from an optimistic form presenting an orderly world wherein crime could never pay to the pessimistic thriller form foregrounding the "endemic lawlessness and corruption" of society. Where has it gone from there? This study of Oates's use of the themes and structures of detective fiction is an attempt to answer this question. Symons suggests that all crime stories are closely linked to the cultural period to which they belong:

> The crime story reflects the prevailing ethic of its period in the attitude adopted by its writers towards police and criminals, crime and punishment. Because crime literature is based on giving the public what it wants, crime writers are more than usually sensitive to shifts of taste. This sensitivity is mostly

[550] Symons 162.
[551] Hamilton 45-46.
[552] Hamilton 46.

> unconscious; they simply find themselves in tune with a considerable section of the reading public on any given subject.[553]

The problem with this statement lies in that it perhaps too easily invites the reversal of the thought process, that if a crime writer writes about an issue, it must belong to the prevailing ethic of the period. However, when coupled with the idea espoused by many critics that Oates is a chronicler of the American middle class, the idea that her crime stories might reflect prevailing ethics is reinforced. The first two parts of this dissertation have shown that the psychological investigation of her characters is an important part of Oates's work. What effect does this have on the role of her detective fiction plots? This chapter's in-depth look at the detectives and the detecting processes portrayed in the corpus works seeks to determine the social function that can be attributed to her "detective" heroes and whether or not her fiction can be considered to act as social criticism. In what way do these stories shed light on the prevailing ethic of the early twenty-first century?

3.9.2. Oates's Detectives: Reversing Traditional Roles

3.9.2.1. Hard-Boiled Seeker of Justice

Rape: A Love Story's John Dromoor, as we have seen, is a taciturn loner figure desiring to make his own way in the world with a well-chiseled conception of what justice is. As such, he has much in common with the hard-boiled detective type. However, this is not the only point linking the novella to the suspense novel type. The two also seem to share the same cynical stance on the world they depict. Hamilton describes the new stance of the 1920s hard-boiled detective novel which "typifies the big-city weariness and wariness of this post-war period; tired of idealism, cynical of reform, it mingles acceptance with outrage as it looks

[553] Symons 177.

around at a world brutalized and morally bankrupt from a dirty, unheroic war and widespread corruption."[554]

More than half a century later, a similar sort of cynicism is expressed in Oates's novella. Indeed, Dromoor's account of the courtroom proceedings in the gang rape case is replete with cynicism from the outset: "Dromoor knew it would be bad. His gut instinct was to wish to hell he had no part in it" (*RLS* 64). This observation is made after simply observing the different parties assembled in the courtroom, noticing the complicity the judge and the defense attorney, both powerful men in the community, seem to share. Dromoor's cynical premonitions turn out to be well-founded when not only does the judge correct his grammar during his testimony and ridicule the prosecuting attorney in front of the courtroom, but also chastises Teena Maguire for wearing dark glasses inside. The final straw comes when it is the defense's turn to present. The defense attorney paints a picture of Teena as a tramp and an unfit mother who propositioned the defendants for consensual sex for money and Bethie as "a confused, frightened child" who "may have been purposefully misled" by her mother. Dromoor is not insensitive to what he considers to be the further victimization of this innocent woman and her child; the courtroom experience leaves him feeling sick: "Dromoor had seen the derailment. Sick in the gut, had to escape" (*RLS* 75). Despite his tough exterior, this episode seems to indicate an inner weakness; he is emotionally vulnerable. This interior weakness is explained by Hamilton as correlated to the detective's exterior toughness:

> The much-admired toughness of the hero is not what it initially seems to be. Far from being swaggering bravado, it indicates vulnerability, and is the tight-lipped response of the potential victim. The private eye lives in jeopardy, physically, socially and metaphysically. / In part, the hero's marginality is a product of his loss of faith. Unable to trust society, he must look to his own resources. The detective, a man of conscience, becomes judge and executioner, upholding his personal vision of justice.[555]

[554] Hamilton 25.
[555] Hamilton 28-29.

This schema assuredly pertains to the officer Dromoor character. That is, in all but the fact that he is not a private eye detective, outside the police force, but a real police officer. In this way, he has perhaps more to potentially lose than a traditional hard-boiled private eye who is already socially marginalized. Dromoor may certainly be considered as metaphysically jeopardized and suffering from a loss of faith in society. The simple information about the effect his time in Desert Storm had on him is enough to support the claim. Later we learn of his belief that no one else can be trusted: "Taking the law into your own hands, fuck what's wrong with that? / Dromoor smiled. Thinking he trusted his own damn hands, not anybody else's" (*RLS* 122).

John Dromoor's function in the book is neither private eye nor detective (though he earns the grade "detective" in the police force over the course of the novella) because he engages in no acts of detection concerning the Teena Maguire gang rape case, which is why I have chosen to refer to him using the alternate term "hard-boiled seeker of justice." From the very beginning, he takes the victims' word as the complete and utter truth. Bethie positively identifies five assailants; they are guilty. Dromoor is deeply affected by the sight of the victim laying near death on the boathouse floor: "He had never been called to the scene of a gang rape before. He had never seen the victim of a gang rape except in photographs. He would not forget the sight" (*RLS* 36). Thus, Dromoor's first impression on scene together with the victims' testimony and the forensic evidence – matching blood, skin and semen samples (*RLS* 42) – constitute his truth about the episode which no attempt to instill reasonable doubt can dissuade.

Dromoor's philosophy of being a detective can be compared to that of a clever criminal trying to figure out a way not to be held accountable for his crime:

> And now he was training to be a detective. His mind seemed to work pretty well that way, too. A police officer on the street is quick reflexes and a sharp eye for danger, a detective is more like playing chess. It's a game and you have time to make your move. You can see the other guy's moves, right out there on

> the board. What you can't see, you have to figure out. What's a detective but a guy using his brains figuring out, If I did this crime, why'd I do it? And who am I? Dromoor liked that feeling.
>
> It was like seeing around two corners not just one. Sometimes, three. (*RLS* 123-124)

He is convinced that taking justice into his own hands is morally right, but knows that it is not socially acceptable to do so. Therefore, like a criminal, he must be careful not to be caught. After Teena's boyfriend, Ray Casey, gets into a bar fight with a Pick cousin, Dromoor cautions him: "You don't want to do this. This is a mistaken thing you are doing. Where there's witnesses" (*RLS* 59). The ambiguity of lawlessness is discussed by Hamilton who claims it

> is often viewed with ambivalence: detrimental to society in general, it tests a man's true worth, both morally and competitively. The result is a contradictory impulse to perpetuate lawlessness while eliminating it; to take the law into one's own hands, meting out extra-legal revenge to reassert the importance of virtue.[556]

In fact, Hamilton considers that "the hard-boiled detective formula met the threat of criminal conspiracy and punished political corruption while maintaining [the ambivalent attitude of individuals willing to break the law when it suits them]."[557]

We come to understand over the course of Part II that for Dromoor, justice in this case means the deaths of the primary rapists. A simple sentence to prison is not enough, for one day they will be eligible for parole (*RLS* 131). Thus, the death of the first assailant comes as no real surprise: "On October 11, 1996, Dromoor killed one of the rapists with two shots from his .45-caliber police service revolver" (*RLS* 94). This is justified as a "self-defense" killing as Jimmy DeLucca was threatening both the police officer and Ray Casey with a knife. That may be so, but one cannot help thinking that Dromoor searched out the situation that would give him the opportunity to end DeLucca's life. First of all, when Teena reports the incident to her daughter, she does so with words "The first of them. He's dead" which causes her

[556] Hamilton 10. Hamilton identifies lawlessness and maximum opportunity for personal enrichment as the two main elements of the American adventure formula.
[557] Hamilton 30.

daughter to reflect on Dromoor's responsibility: "*The first of them*. You would wonder if these were Dromoor's words, carefully chosen" (*RLS* 94). After all, the police officer had already expressed a desire to help Teena; driving her home one night from the park, he had "left his cell phone number neatly written on a piece of paper. To pass on to Teena. Beneath the number these words: *Any hours of the day or night. D*" (*RLS* 85).[558] Secondly, at the end of the chapter relating the death of Jimmy DeLucca, we are once again reminded of Dromoor's conception of justice and corresponding self-assigned mission: "It was a good time for Dromoor. He felt good about the future. *Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth*. In time" (*RLS* 103).

In fact, the police officer's character is presented much more like a hunter than a private-eye. In the incident pertaining to the disappearance of the Pick brothers (rapists two and three), Dromoor is implicitly compared to a hawk, a predator bird (*RLS* 121). Dromoor's involvement in this disappearance is not made explicit though it is definitely implied. "Marvin Pick, Lloyd Pick. One day in late October 1996, the two prime defendants in the Rocky Point rape case simply vanished" (*RLS* 105). Gradually, additional information is provided allowing the reader to put two and two together. The brothers' lawyer was negotiating a plea bargain that would significantly lower the charges brought against them (*RLS* 105). The afternoon prior to their disappearance they received a phone call from an unknown man instructing them to drive to Fort Niagara State Park to collect some photographs that would incriminate the witnesses against them (*RLS* 115-116). Their car was later found undamaged in the park (*RLS* 117-118). Bethie had previously phoned Dromoor to report the Pick brothers continued harassment of her mother, pleading "*Help us please help us John Dromoor we are so afraid*" (*RLS* 119-120). Finally, "soon after the call from Teena's daughter, Dromoor drove out to Fort Niagara State Park. Wanting to check out the site" (*RLS* 121). After a thirty-minute walk

[558] Dromoor's "handwritten" words which I have represented above in italics, are presented in the novella in actual handwriting.

around the area, he has come to a decision: "Watching the hawks, he'd made his decision. Not even thinking but just watching the hawks. / Dromoor felt good about DeLucca. He seemed to know, he'd feel even better about the Picks" (*RLS* 125).

At this point in the chronology, only one threat to Teena and Bethie remains: "Except for Fritz Haaber, the remaining defendants had changed their pleas to 'guilty' and would negotiate deals with the prosecutors, but Haaber, with his previous assault record, was pleading 'not guilty'" (*RLS* 134). The fact that the remaining others publicly acknowledged their guilt seems to exempt them from vigilante punishment at the hands of Dromoor. Such is not the case for Fritz Haaber who continues to stalk Bethie in public places (*RLS* 135). By this time, Bethie has made the connection between Dromoor and the disappearances/deaths, so she decides to set the machine in motion once again: "But you were terrified of Haaber. You seemed to know *He will kill me*. And so you told your grandmother about him, crying hysterically in the front seat of your grandmother's car. You told your grandmother thinking *She will tell Momma, Momma will call Dromoor*" (*RLS* 135-136). Sure enough, Haaber's death occurs shortly after: "Night of November 22 three days before the trial was scheduled to begin doused himself with gasoline. Lit a match" (*RLS* 137). It looks like a suicide. However, the day before, the reader knows, Haaber had received a phone call inviting him to meet a sexy-sounding woman claiming to be called Louellen Drott at the Black Rooster Motel and upon his arrival, he observed a "Ford station wagon" parked out front (*RLS* 146). This is the only concrete link that the reader can make between Haaber's death and John Dromoor as we know he drives a station wagon; he had it when he scouted out Fort Niagara State Park (*RLS* 125). This is circumstantial evidence at best; however, the reader has no doubts regarding to whom the death should be attributed.

Hamilton writes that the hard-boiled detective novel comes to terms with the "troubling urban phenomena" of the post World War I era by using violence as "an act of

exorcism."[559] In *Rape: A Love Story*, this is quite literally so. Through the deaths of her assailants Teena's demons are exorcised and she is able to get on with her life: "Since DeLucca's death, and since the Pick brothers had vanished, you could see that your mother was less anxious" (*RLS* 131). Finally, the closing chapter of Part II, after the incident relating Fritz Haaber's death, is the reproduction of the written side of a postcard sent from Teena to her daughter almost five months later. Teena is traveling around in a camper with a male friend named DeWitt, "the most generous decent man," and claims to be "so happy" and loving "this new life" (*RLS* 149).

Oates's Dromoor, as we have seen, is not looking to uncover any truths. He believes he already possesses that knowledge. He seeks, quite simply, the assurance that justice, according to his conception of it, has been arrived at. Holding his rifle in his hands, Dromoor reflects: "He was coming to see the beauty of a sleek long-barreled gun, smooth-gleaming wood stock. Yet he would not wish to shoot one of these birds. He would not wish to shoot any living creature except in self-defense or in defense of another" (*RLS* 122). By coming to the defense of Teena Maguire and her daughter, by ridding them of the paralyzing fear that the assailants would one day come back to finish the job, Dromoor effectively dispenses his form of justice. By taking the lives of four people, he gives life back to two "innocents." Apparently, according to Dromoor's mathematics, this equation is just, equilibrium has been reestablished.

Though *Rape: A Love Story* uses themes and structures identifiable with the hard-boiled type, these have been transposed onto a twenty-first century setting. The contemporary attitude, as discussed in Chapter 7, involves less a sense of cynicism at the rampant evil of the city than a sense of personal confusion due to a newfound difficulty to establish meaning by dispersed, spectral characters who have become unanchored. Throughout Part II of *Rape: A*

[559] Hamilton 26. The role of violence in the corpus works will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Love Story, Dromoor provides an illusion of control and meaning. We believe his actions are moral and approve them. Indeed, the implied author,[560] through the construction of the narrative, seems to be guiding the reader towards this precise judgment. However, the ending of the novella contradicts the optimism of such a reading by showing the depth of Bethie's psychic disturbance. The fact that the adult Bethie feels lonely and lost contradicts the perceived guidance of the implied author, pointing instead to an experience of unreadability; no direction is offered to the reader after all.

The Dromoor character has done exactly what the victims and the reader wanted him to do. However, in spite of this the novella ends upon a feeling of profound sadness. The world, Bethie realizes, is not as cut and dried as we would like to believe, rather it is a combination of ugliness and beauty, hatred and love, something that very few people can understand (*RLS* 153). Indeed, this ending seems to point to a post-humanist vision in which the project of understanding the world around us is no longer understood as one in which success is possible.[561]

3.9.2.2. Unreliable, Purely Selfish Motives

Gillian, the first person narrator of *Beasts*, bears a certain resemblance to Teena and Bethie Maguire. Like them, she is victimized sexually, and like them, she takes the responsibility for justice into her own hands (Teena and Bethie did this by appealing to Officer Dromoor, knowing he would take action) and lives to look back from the future and tell her tale. The case of Gillian, however, is a much more complicated one because, as we have seen, it is virtually impossible to determine the precise nature of her role due to the

[560] Booth explains the concept of the "implied author." The implied author, he writes, is not equivalent to the actual author of a work, rather it is the core of norms and choices used by a writer in constructing his narrative (71-76). In this way it is the implicit picture of an author behind the scene (151-152). In a well-constructed work, the implied author, no matter his convictions, is able to carry the reader with him (157).

[561] Joseph Farrell explains that humanism is the belief of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment followers of the cult of reason that the human being is a "rational animal." Humanists are dedicated to understanding the world around them and believe that this project can be successful. Introduction, *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004) 9.

confusion surrounding practically every element of her narrative. Gillian is an ambiguous character who sometimes presents herself as a victim, other times as a competitive individualist. She is a patchwork of contrasts, at times portraying herself as sweet, sensitive and confused, at others coming across as deceitful, sneaky and proactive, chanting her professor's mantra "go for the jugular." This is a first person unreliable retrospective narrator constructed along the lines of what can be called "Poe's paradigm." A case could be made to support the claim that Gillian is like one of Poe's "perverse narrators with a passion for analysis," an expression used by J. Gerald Kennedy when referring to those tales in which "Poe explored the terrors of a criminal driven to detect and silence himself after silencing an adversary."[562] The difference with Oates's narrator here, however, is that Gillian is convinced of the moral legitimacy of her actions and therefore feels no need to silence herself, insisting in the very first pages that she has nothing to confess. At once narrator, victim and seeker of justice, Gillian is also the detective, making the circle complete. All of these roles are performed at various times by this one character. The effect of having all of the information filtered through one lone viewpoint is to reinforce the feeling that an authorial voice is absent from the work as there is nothing to counter the unreliability of the narrator. Indeed, the absence of narratorial responsibility that can be observed in Oates's work is one of its contemporary aspects and one of the characteristics, we will see, that distances her fiction from traditional detective fiction models. Though Oates's fiction cannot be completely categorized as blank fiction, as previously demonstrated, this is one of the characteristics the two share. As Viart explains, "man and his actions have been separated from meaning. The writer of blank fiction is one who, having made this observation, does not attempt to reestablish meaning" through the aesthetic use of language.[563]

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[562] J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (London: Yale University Press, 1987) 128.
[563] My translation of: "L'homme et son agitation sont séparés du sens. L'écrivain de l'écriture blanche serait celui qui, ayant fait ce constat, n'entendrait pas ré-instituer le sens." Viart 18.

As we have already discussed, the problem is presented in the opening pages of the novella by Gillian herself, who at the same time introduces the possibility of her untrustworthiness. The sight of a totem in the Louvre provokes a strange response in the narrator and prompts an unexpected revelation that she possesses privileged information about two deaths. We can infer that these deaths were not in fact accidental, as the authorities believe, and that Gillian knows the truth about their occurrence which may or may not have involved direct action on her part. She has been keeping this secret for a quarter-century. Though she claims her narrative will not be a confession, it is difficult to believe her. In spite of this claim, the situation cannot help but call to mind such confession narratives as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," for example, in which the narrator "would unburthen [his] soul" before his upcoming execution.[564] Gillian does not appear to risk death, but at the same time it seems clear that she is not entirely innocent and does wish to finally unburden her soul. Between the passage revealing the non-accidental nature of the deaths and the statement that her story is not a confession comes this passage:

> The Parisian sky was *opaque*, the Seine was the color of lead. Far away the romantic spires of Notre Dame were nearly *obscured* in mist, or smog. I was so distracted I hardly noticed the venders' *intrusive* stalls *blocking* the view of the *fabled* river. (*B* 2-3, emphasis mine)

One cannot help but notice the theme of obstruction present in this short paragraph. It is as if the narrator is indicating that she is trying to see through the opacity to the truth of the forms below while at the same time warning the reader of the possibility of a distracting smokescreen in the tale to come. The idea of duality of meaning is also illustrated through certain D.H. Lawrence poems that Mr. Harrow reads to his students, foregrounding the power labels can have over perception. It is only when Mr. Harrow reads "Peach" aloud to his lecture class that Gillian understands its true subject: "For I understood now that the true

[564] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970) 390. Joyce Carol Oates has parodied works of Poe on several occasions: see her story "The White Cat" in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, a rewriting of Poe's "The Black Cat," or her *Mysteries of Winterthurn* which parodies Poe's detective Dupin.

subject of the poem wasn't a peach, a peach devoured by the poet, a peach he finds delicious, juice running down his fingers, the true subject of the poem was the female body" (*B* 29).

Gillian is collector, presenter and interpreter of evidence all at once. The privilege of this literary position is, of course, the prerogative to manipulate the reader. This is reminiscent of the "game" of classic detective fiction as explained by Thomas Narcejac:

> In order to keep his advantage, the novelist now feels obliged to *mislead* the reader. Therefore, the reader must keep one eye on the game and the other on his partner, like a player who knows that attempts will be made to distract him and make him lose his cool. Certainly, all the shots will play by the rules (at the literal level), but now they will be accompanied by feints, ruses, and "tricks" that are no longer part of the simple logic but of a psychology (non-literal level). In other words, the clues will be presented in the order chosen by the author and no longer in the order they would typically be discovered by an investigator.[565]

The story's structure encourages the perception of Gillian as an amateur detective character. Though it is apparent that she knows certain "answers" from the very beginning, the framing device sends us back twenty-five years in the past to a time when Gillian is still innocent and not yet responsible for any deaths. We are tricked by Gillian the narrator into thinking she adopts the point of view of the Gillian of Fall 1975 when she portrays her former self as the innocent girl victim, though a closer reading reveals several ambiguities. As we have seen, the chronological body of the story starts out in Chapter 3 which is dated 26 September 1975. From this very moment, Gillian begins to cast herself in the role of private-eye/stalker/detective. As the chapter opens, Gillian "was following the woman [Dorcas] through a hilly wooded area, along a path strewn with pine needles into the village of Catamount, Massachusetts." She believes that she is inconspicuously following the woman who is "unsuspecting of being followed" and this for "the fifth or sixth time" (*B* 9). In

[565] My translation of: "Le romancier, pour garder l'avantage, se voit donc obligé d'*égarer* le lecteur. Celui-ci doit, désormais, garder un œil sur la partie et l'autre sur le partenaire, exactement comme un joueur qui sait que l'on va essayer de le distraire et de lui faire perdre son sang froid. Certes, tous les coups seront réguliers (jeu au premier degré), mais ils toléreront maintenant des feintes, des ruses, des 'astuces' qui ne relèveront plus de la simple logique mais de la psychologie (jeu au deuxième degré). Autrement dit, les indices seront présentés dans l'ordre choisi par l'auteur et non plus dans l'ordre où ils devraient s'offrir d'eux-mêmes à l'enquêteur." Cited by Delphine Kresge, "Détectives et chroniqueurs dans les romans policiers britanniques," *Américana* 13, ed. Jeanne-Marie Santraud (Paris: Presses de l'université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1996) 27-28.

addition to following, Gillian also "made inquiries about Dorcas" and learned that "sometimes a lucky girl was hired as Dorcas's intern" although "it was rumored that, if you were so singled out by the Harrows, you had better not boast of it, nor even speak of it to your closest friends, or you'd never be invited back" (*B* 48). Later on she engages in similar types of actions, staking out the Harrows' house and making inquiries about her friends.

Though she acknowledges in her journal "*the excitement. Almost unbearable tension/pleasure. Following another person in secret*" (*B* 10) Gillian wishes to convince the reader that these episodes were not brought about of her own volition but that she was somehow charmed by some outside force into her involvement in the tailing: "I had not intended this. I had not wished to follow Andre Harrow's wife" (*B* 10), she pleads, and "these small adventures were not premeditated, as you can see. They were not willed. I was no predator seeking prey, I was myself the prey. I was the innocent party" (*B* 12). However, these are the sort of reflections that are made with the wisdom of hindsight. It seems unlikely that she could have considered herself as prey from the very beginning while at the same time reveling in the pleasures of following an unsuspecting person, all the while congratulating herself for being "like a hunting dog picking up a scent" (*B* 12). Such inconsistencies cast doubt upon the question of this detective's reliability.

Gillian's realms of inquiry are initially multiple. She is interested in finding out more about Dorcas, justifying this by explaining that "If you love a married man you exist in a special, secret, undeclared relationship with his wife" (*B* 10). She also spends time trying to figure out which of her girlfriends are involved with their professor and his wife and speculates with her friends about the identity of the campus arsonist. In fact, Gillian is constantly posing questions and speculating about the situations around her. She wonders whether Dorcas would be amused to know she was following her (*B* 9). She chastises herself for her "hopeless infatuation" for her professor and asks herself "What would my mother

think? My distant, aging father?" (*B* 11). She speculates about the "mystery or secret" regarding Dorcas's motherhood (*B* 13) and about the reasons behind men's stares: "I wondered if they knew her, or if they were responding simply to her appearance. Clearly she aroused their interest, their disapproval, their resentment, possibly their admiration" (*B* 17-18). She asks herself "why set fires at Catamount, of all colleges? What was the symbolism, what was the purpose?" (*B* 22). She wonders at her attraction for this professor who is not what you would call handsome (*B* 35). The motives for the fires pop back into her mind: "Taking a chair he offered me, beside his desk, I recalled how not long ago the unknown arsonist had set a fire in oily rags beneath Mr. Harrow's window. Had it been mere chance, or deliberate?" (*B* 39). She struggles to understand the meaning behind Andre's words (*B* 40) and the metamorphosing in Ovid (*B* 41). In fact, this type of constant questioning characterises the novella throughout, leading up to the final "My hair? What had happened to my hair?" (*B* 134), a question she asks herself in a confused state after setting the deadly final fire in which she seems not to remember having previously cut her hair as part of her plan for revenge. Incessant questioning is what one might expect from a detective, though. Is not posing questions and constantly wondering about motives what a good detective does?

At the same time, however, it becomes apparent that there is more to Gillian's constant questioning than just a detective's keen desire to get to the bottom of things. Gillian, it turns out, is very unsure of herself and constantly weighing the different possible motivations for her actions, never able to choose between one interpretation or another. When tailing Dorcas through the woods, she reflects: "Yet I seemed to know that there would be something different about today, this afternoon. That possibly I would make a mistake, and regret it. Or maybe: it wouldn't be a mistake" (*B* 10). She makes statements such as "It was that simple, and yet it wasn't simple at all" (*B* 13). She is conscious of feeling both "disturbed" and "excited" at the sight of Dorcas's primitive sculptures (*B* 14) and "never knew whether [she]

admired Dorcas's wooden figures, or detested them." Remarking upon the crude, anti-feminine quality of the sculptures, Gillian cannot decide upon their worth: "Was that a good thing, or not so good a thing?" (*B* 16). Her interpretation of her friends' teasing lacks conviction: "I think they meant no harm. I think they didn't hate me" (*B* 45). She cannot decide how to interpret Mr. Harrow's behavior: "Mr. Harrow could have had no idea (could he?) how I adored him; how I fantasised about him, in private; how, in his presence, I rarely spoke because no words of mine seemed adequate, worthy" (*B* 38). As discussed at length in Part I, this type of language continues throughout, causing a feeling of abiding confusion to prevail. Even Gillian's memories of the final episode are unclear: "The confusion in my head was like static that waxed, then waned, then waxed again, deafening" (*B* 130). Gillian occupies the role of detective in the story, however, she is either unable or unwilling to interpret the facts and relay much concrete information, the "truth" is probably a mixture of both. If Dromoor's certainty in *Rape: A Love Story* is in sharp contrast to the indeterminacy of meaning evoked by the overall structure of the novella, Gillian's confused vision, with its constant blend of perception and fantasy, bears the mark of the contemporary all the more.

Regarding the campus fires, Gillian and her friends discuss the evidence and even make certain deductions. The reasoning goes roughly like this: If one individual is responsible for the fires, the conclusion that fire investigators had come to (*B* 22), then the culprit must be someone who is a student on campus because one of the fires was set in the library and an outsider would have been noticed (*B* 24). This is obviously not airtight logic, but it is the process that is interesting here rather than the logic itself. The roommates even speculate on the arsonist's motivations, imagining her as a girl who is crazy in love, an easy jump to make as the description fits all of them perfectly. This also reinforces the idea that the arsonist could be one of these very girls, maybe even the narrator herself, giving the reader further reason to be wary of her presentation of events.

In addition, Gillian frequently presents herself as one whose free will has been preempted by uncontrollable outside forces: "I hurried to follow Dorcas as if she'd called to me. What choice had I?" (*B* 11). And at times the very idea of her sanity is called into question. She imagines Mr. Harrow to be silently communicating to her the message "*Gillian, you will be loved. I will care for you*" and responds with an adamant "Was I imagining this? I was not" (*B* 30). Furthermore, her ability to assess information is lacking, we learn. Her talents at tailing, we eventually discover, are not as fine-tuned as she thinks. Dorcas had noticed she was being followed and even reported as much to her husband (*B* 40).

Thus, Gillian is an aspiring amateur detective who is largely uncertain, unsure and unable to interpret phenomena around her in any coherent way. She seems to be living in a disconnected dream-like state in which meaning is lost. Her diffuse spectral nature leaves her empty, like a prism, vulnerable to outside influence, similar to the way a prism only refracts the light that shines on it.[566] Indeed, she is occasionally described as daydreaming: "Dreamily I took hold of my long, wavy, glinting hair in both hands and lifted it in thick strands and let it sift through my fingers slowly. I heard Dorcas's approving voice in my ear" (*B* 47). However, her professor's taunting reference to her as a "Philomela" (*B* 37), a character from Ovid's "myths of metamorphosis" (*B* 39), indicates the potential for evolution. Shortly thereafter in the text (around the transition from chapter 8 to 9), Gillian begins to take on a more active role. An active investigation of her friends begins, as opposed to the former passive speculation. When Gillian asks Dominique whether she has ever been invited to the Harrows' house, she answers "Absolutely no" (*B* 48). However, Sybil provides Gillian with conflicting

[566] Jean Baudrillard explains the difference between "ghostly spectrality" and "prismatic spectrality." The former, he writes, corresponds to a disconnection; it is a spectrality haunted by emptiness and death. The latter, however, corresponds to "the refraction of different colors in light or of different facets of the 'individual.'" Therefore, it has to do with "a reduction of the individual into different roles and facets. There is no haunting. On the contrary, he is no longer inhabited by something, he is completely extrapolated, externalized. He should rather be considered in terms of his multiplicity." My translation of: "une spectralité prismatique, celle de la réfraction de différentes couleurs dans la lumière ou des différentes facettes dans 'l'individu'"; "Tandis que dans la démultiplication de l'individu dans différents rôles et facettes, il n'y a pas de hantise, au contraire, il n'est plus habité par quelque chose, il est complètement en extrapolation, en extériorité. Il est plutôt à considérer en termes de branchements multiples." Baudrillard and Guillaume 37.

information: “In fact, according to Sybil, Dominique had been seen more than once walking on Brierly Lane after dark. She’d been seen in Andre Harrow’s car in Great Barrington” (*B* 49). Gillian stakes out the couple’s house and believes she sees Marisa inside the studio with them (*B* 51). Finally, she arranges a “chance” meeting with her professor that leads to their first kiss.

Gillian’s investigative tactics, if the term can be so employed, are engaged exclusively towards the realization of her personal wish fulfillment, towards deciphering the mystery of her professor’s rumored involvement with certain students and finding out a way to become involved with him herself. She seems to recognize fairly early on the possibility that her professor might be cycling through his female students, yet she refuses to recognize any danger and seems unsympathetic towards those friends who get hurt. For example, she volunteers to help Sybil’s mother pack up her things hoping she might discover something personal, a sneaky strategy that proves fruitful when she finds “a single Polaroid of Sybil posed before a life-sized wooden figure of a primitive female. One of Dorcas’s totems!” (*B* 65). She pockets the photograph, not telling anyone about it (*B* 66). Gillian’s secrecy is not motivated by a desire for Sybil’s well-being, to avoid her further embarrassment, for example. Rather, were she to reveal her find, her own interest in the Harrows might be guessed at by the other girls.

This amateur detective figure, emphasis on amateur, ultimately fails because of her latent immaturity. She poses questions and seeks answers about her world, but fails because she lacks the knowledge and frame of reference from which to conduct a proper analysis. Her inquiry into the nature of the Harrows’ relationship with certain other students should have been enough to warn her off, yet her naiveté prevents her from acknowledging the potential dangers. She even shrugs off a warning from Dominique who has noticed “the back of [her] right hand, which was covered in scratches and small scabs” from a “nasty ol’ green parrot”

(*B* 105). Certain comments indicate that Gillian the adult has reassessed elements of her past and realized where she misinterpreted certain clues, such as this comment: "That an adult man, a professor, should care so much for the quality of undergraduate women's work . . . This seemed to us not strange and troubling, but wonderful" (*B* 70). In spite of this, the "facts" remain largely confused. Even when Gillian relays what she calls "the one clear fact" she knew about this time, she cannot be completely sure of herself: "[Andre's] fascination with Dorcas was absolute. Her fascination with him. No one could ever come between. I'd known that, *I think*. It was the one clear fact I would know" (*B* 93, my emphasis).

As a detective, therefore, Gillian is not very successful. She is able to uncover a certain amount of information about the Harrows and use it to enter into a relationship with them and her questions about which of her friends have also been so involved are ultimately solved to a degree through the evidence discovered in the locked filing cabinet. However, the mystery of the campus arsonist remains unsatisfactorily unresolved. Ultimately, as an immature young female, Gillian seems to be trying to decipher the motivations behind other people's actions in an attempt to come to an understanding of her place in the world and carve out an identity for herself. The mature narrator's goal seems to be to unburden herself and justify her actions, portraying her younger self as a victim acting in self-defense. However, her pro-active stance as an amateur detective causes us to consider her differently, attributing to her a larger share of the responsibility. She is not as innocent as she would have us think. Therefore, like *Rape: A Love Story*, *Beasts* ends up foregrounding the ambiguity of innocence and the problem of interpreting a text that is highly influenced by a single viewpoint. After all, Gillian's final gesture was not her only recourse; the more proper action would have been to bring her findings to the authorities. As Pierre Bayard points out in his rereading of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, "a first person narrative does not tell a story, it gives

a point of view on a story."[567] In terms of Gillian's narrative, indeterminacy of ending is foregrounded by the realization that her "story" is incomplete.

As is clear from the above discussion, the reader is put into the position of detective as is required in Van Dine's analogy, trying to read between the lines and figure out the answers to the same questions as Gillian herself. However, the reader cannot detect, but can only engage in speculation, because the facts are not clearly presented by the narrator who is too closely involved. To be fair, intradiegetic narrators are standard commodities of detective fiction and their points of view are typically flawed in some way, as Delphine Kresge explains:

> The use of an intradiegetic voice thus allows the author to avoid the use of an omniscient narrator with the ability to probe the hearts and souls of the characters. Such a narrative authority has to dissimulate his complete knowledge in order to maintain a certain amount of mystery. On the other hand, the use of an intradiegetic narrator allows for the presentation of clues in an indirect yet natural way because the narrator adopts the point of view of a simple witness.[568]

However, these types of narrator are not typically permitted to themselves be the "criminal," that is a flagrant offense of Van Dine's rules. Indeed, certain of Gillian's characteristics point to the possibility of parallels with Agatha Christie's Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Kresge dismisses the objections of "foul play" raised at the time of this text's publication:

> Another way of playing with the text, with the truth, reaches a climax in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie. Published during the Golden Age of detective fiction, this novel provoked strong objections from purists who condemned the absence of *fair play* and respect for the rules of the genre. However, this is not in fact cheating because the tricks are required by the presence of a narrator-murderer. Sheppard never lies to the reader or potential narratee. He plays with words, ellipsis, omission. The act of murder thus disappears between two sentences.[569]

This recalls the omissions, uncertainties and ambiguities of the narrator Gillian in Oates's novella. As she herself writes, "in love at a distance, you learn the strategies of indirection" (*B*

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[567] My translation of: "Le récit à la première personne ne raconte pas une histoire, il donne un point de vue sur une histoire." Pierre Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1998) 73.
[568] Kresge 29.
[569] Kresge 33.

35). Might Gillian's involvement in the campus arsons be hidden somewhere between the lines of the text? In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the narrator Dr. Sheppard never lies to the reader, rather he simply omits essential information from his text. The result is in the creation of a double text which both disguises and exhibits the truth "because each sentence can be read in two different ways," explains Bayard, "depending on the ultimate solution one wants to support."[570] In Christie's novel, the solution to the crime, though hidden, remains accessible on condition that the clues are read in the correct way. Bayard proposes an alternate interpretation of the clues leading to an alternate solution, but it is also based on a reading of the clues present in the text.

Whereas Bayard is able to reread Christie's novel and suggest an alternate resolution to the enigma of Ackroyd's murder, this does not seem possible in the case of Oates's text where we cannot be sure that the narrator always tells the truth. As we have seen, upon some occasions she presents conflicting interpretations of her actions. In light of this, is it possible to trust anything she says? For example, when she claims to have "no idea who the arsonist was" (*B* 22)? Certainly, as Gillian has let on, she is all too familiar with the relationship between fire imagery, passion and criminal urges. During the Dorcas tailing episode, she recognizes "The conviction, or maybe it was the sensation, to which I gave the name *love*, coursed through my veins like liquid flame" (*B* 9). Furthermore, when she mentions her final visit to Dorcas's exhibit at the campus museum she describes her "sudden impulse to deface one of the figures": "A flame passed over my brain. I hated the ugly thing! I removed a fluorescent-orange marker pen from my backpack, approached the figure tremulously, and stood before it for several minutes trying to summon up the courage to deface it" (*B* 16).

Great care is taken by Gillian to relate the details of fire alarm episodes for which she has an alibi, such as the night of the "first false alarm in Heath Cottage" when she had taken

[570] My translation of: "*la vérité est ici à la fois déguisée et exhibée*, puisque chaque phrase du livre peut se lire de deux manières différentes, selon la solution ultime qu'on décide de faire prévaloir." Bayard 55.

"two of [Dominique's] prescription barbiturates" to help her sleep and was observed staggering downstairs after the alarm in a groggy stupor (*B* 53-55). Yet such care is not taken involving all of the fire or alarm related episodes. Moreover, there is this disturbing comment made after she reports that "Cassie, who'd signed up for psychological counselling in September, complained bitterly of being singled out for protracted questioning" (*B* 55): "I thought, *I will never make that mistake. Not me!*" (*B* 56). Interestingly as well, once Gillian becomes involved with the Harrows, all mention of campus fires and false alarms stops, with the exception of Marisa's breakdown incident (*B* 87-89). Gillian is quick to point out that "since [Marisa's] breakdown, there'd been no more fires or fire alarms on campus" (*B* 93). But the breakdown coincides with the beginning of Gillian's involvement with the older couple. Finally, let us not forget Andre Harrow's accusing her of being "circumspect" which would indicate a certain amount of control on her part (*B* 60).

Thus, the effect of frequent questioning and expression of uncertainty, together with her claims of preemption of her freewill, is for the reader to initially view Gillian as a naive, innocent victim. After further reflection, however, comes the realization that her actions are ambiguous and we wonder whether she was actually a victim or simply adept at the act of deception. Gillian, we are sure, like those around her, dissimulates to some degree. Everyone on campus is playing this game. The question is, and remains, to what degree? Unlike in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the "truth" remains permanently hidden, inaccessible.

3.9.2.3. Amateurs, Unwittingly Forced Into Role

In the opening pages of part three of *The Falls*, as has been shown, it becomes clear that Ariah has done her best to erase, as much as possible, the existence of Dirk Burnaby from her children's lives. Royall is the sibling who initiates the amateur investigation into their father's life and death. He senses that his mother has forbidden him some knowledge and that

others in the community know more about his family's past than he does himself. Royall's initial idea is to ask his brother for information. Chandler had been eleven at the time of their father's death (*TF* 337), old enough to remember certain things about it and about their father in general, but he will not tell Royall anything because of his promise to Ariah. Instead, he suggests Royall can investigate on his own (*TF* 330). It is at this point that Royall the amateur detective is born. Unaided in his desire for knowledge by his family members, he is left to his own devices, an amateur unwittingly forced into the role of detective.

In the beginning, Royall is not yet investigating a murder. He is simply seeking information about the man who was his father. He goes to the public library to look at old newspapers, recognizing that his quest has been prompted by his strange encounter in the cemetery. This link between the woman in black and the investigation prompts us to draw a parallel between Royall and his father. Indeed, Royall recalls in many ways Todorov's "suspect-as-detective" when viewed as a metaphysical next generation representative of a dead father seeking to clear his name of the so-called wrongs piled upon him by the mother. Just as "after he meets Nina, Dirk moves further and further away from Ariah's cocooned family life into the public life of lawyer for the Love Canal lawsuit,"[571] as Sharon Dean reminds us, Royall's encounter with the woman in black (who, we have seen, may be interpreted as an incarnation of Nina Olshaker) prompts him to take charge of his own life, moving out of a static realm controlled by women, his mother and his fiancé. Likewise, Chandler's involvement in the investigation comes after he vows "he would take his life in hand" (*TF* 374). This promise is prompted by his break-up with Melinda after the crisis intervention incident. She accused him of tossing his life like dice, something that she considered as having to do in some way with his father.

[571] Sharon L. Dean, "History and Representation in *The Falls*", *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006): 529.

In this way, Royall and Chandler are detectives of necessity. They must fill in the blank in their past in order to metaphysically continue living themselves. The changes the brothers undergo through their investigative process attest to this fact. When Chandler finally goes to visit his brother, breaking their period of estrangement, it is clear to each of them that the other has changed:

> [Chandler's] heart went out to his younger brother as to a child bravely playing house, having run away from home. On his side, Royall saw with surprise that his schoolteacher brother was looking uncertain, brooding, red-eyed in a way he'd rarely seen him; Chandler's jaws had been carelessly shaved, and his jacket was buttoned crookedly. (*TF* 387)

Royall feels like he has been trying to wake up from the dream his life has been until then (*TF* 388) and that learning about his dad represents the beginning of the serious part of his life (*TF* 391). It is as if through the process of collecting information about their father, at the same time they have been learning about themselves and accordingly becoming different both physically and mentally.

In his role as investigator, Royall mutates for "a brief hallucinatory time" into a hard-boiled detective type, even acquiring a new name for this alter ego: "Roy, working for Empire Collection Agency" (*TF* 480). In his role as collection agent, Royall is transformed from a dopey all-American nice boy into a hard-boiled type. He carries a gun and his job has its dangerous side; other agents have been beaten up, stabbed, chased and even shot at (*TF* 390). Royall indicates to his brother that he would be capable of using the gun to revenge their father's death (*TF* 389). This shift in personality is accompanied by a parallel transformation in his physical appearance which simultaneously becomes more rugged: "Pale stubble glittered on his jaws like mica" (*TF* 389).

Reinforcing the connection between *The Falls* and the world of the hard-boiled detective novel is the portrayal of the Niagara Falls wealthy, those who stood to lose from the

Love Canal lawsuit. The treatment corresponds to Hamilton's description of the corrupting power of the dollar:

> The private eye's refusal to accept a monetary reward reflects this awareness of the corrupting power of the dollar. The generally unsympathetic portrayal of the wealthy in the hard-boiled novel also reflects this view: they are empty souls who hide behind a showy façade, or manipulative brokers ready to consider any commodity as a medium of exchange, or they are outright hoodlums.[572]

Though there is never a question of monetary reward for Chandler and Royall who are working for themselves, the rest of the description certainly corresponds well to the case of their father's so-called former "friends." Likewise, Oates includes certain passages like the one below reinforcing the bleakness and despair of this Niagara Falls which is depicted as having been used up and tossed out by its powerful elite:

> In this new Niagara Falls where a shift in the wind turned the very air sepia, made eyes smart and breathing difficult, "crises" had become commonplace, like crime. Rarely did these crises involve individuals who'd made pilgrimages to The Falls to commit a spectacular act of suicide; these were natives of the city, nearly always men. They acted upon impulse in sudden rage, despair, madness, fueled by alcohol and drugs committing acts of unpremeditated violence, much of it domestic. Their weapons were guns, knives, hammers, fists. Often they committed suicide after their rage played out, or tried to.
>
> "Gunman/hostage." The dispatcher at the Crisis Center had told Chandler that robbery or burglary didn't seem to be involved. The motive had to be purely emotional, the most dangerous of motives. (*TF* 344-345)

The problem, however, in terms of Royall as detective is that his investigation, as we have seen, is missing from the pages of the novel. The investigation that is present in the text is the one conducted in parallel a few months later by Chandler. Though we are encouraged, it seems, to consider Chandler's and Royall's investigations as equivalent through the knowledge that Chandler is retracing certain of Royall's steps, this is nothing but conjecture on the part of the reader. At the same time, there is evidence to indicate that Royall's investigation has perhaps been less thorough than his brother's. For example, when Chandler mentions the name Howell, Royall does not seem to know who he is (*TF* 389). Thus, the text

[572] Hamilton 27.

presents us on the one hand with a mysterious investigation conducted by a rugged hard-boiled type, and on the other hand with information collected by a sort of assistant. The effect is to cast Chandler as the brains of the investigative team and Royall as the brawn. Indeed, the possibility is raised that Royall did in fact act upon his brother's indication that the target, if action were to be taken, would be Howell (*TF* 389). Later, upon reading "in the papers the shocking news of the midsummer disappearance of Chief Justice Stroughton Howell," Chandler wonders whether Royall might not be responsible (*TF* 471). But then again, Chandler begins to doubt this notion, as time goes on it no longer seems realistic:

> He [Royall] no longer carries a gun. He no longer has any need to carry a gun. Since that evening in his apartment on Fourth Street, when the brothers spoke together so frankly, Royall has never alluded to any gun, and Chandler has never asked him about any gun. Chandler almost might think *Was there a gun? Was it real?* He'd been drinking that night, and his memory was muddled. (*TF* 471-472)

Adding to the confusion is the fact that an important piece of the puzzle is discovered by neither Royall nor Chandler, but by a character outside their investigation. A crucial element of the Dirk Burnaby mystery is communicated through the focalizer of the youngest Burnaby sibling, Juliet. Though she is not an active seeker of information, she unwittingly comes to know a central piece of the puzzle through her relationship with Bud Stonecrop. Oates here presents a sibling trio comprised of two amateur detectives unable to find all the information they pursue, complimented by a non-detective who unintentionally acquires her knowledge.

In terms of the attempt to uncover the "truth" about Dirk Burnaby's life and death, the information collected by each of the children remains incomplete. We are told that Chandler and Royall compare notes, however, there is no reason to believe that they share their information with Juliet, or that she passes on her knowledge about their father's hired assassin. In addition, only Royall knows for sure whether or not he was involved in Justice Howell's disappearance. However, thanks to the interweaving of the narrative points of view a more

complete picture is created for the reader, as Sharon Dean points out when she discusses the unique structure of the novel's third part:

> As Oates develops how each of the children grows after the death of Dirk and how they react when the Love Canal case is finally won and their father posthumously honored, she at times merges their point of view into a collective *we*, the voice of an archetypal unconscious that echoes the voice of the Falls.[573]

Indeed, in the absence of narrative authority, it is the interweaving of the characters' voices and the evocation of a collective unconscious that must creates the meaning of the text. In this structure, the characters speak for themselves while the author remains silent.

More important than the observation that each character's individual vision remains incomplete is the fact that the closing pages of the novel would indicate their coming to terms with this knowledge. Chandler "seems to know, he will never know" the truth about Stroughton Howell (*TF* 476). And yet, he and his brother's efforts have paid off, providing them with a more complete understanding of their parents' pasts: "Chandler has begun to understand something of his mother's grief sixteen years before. She has never hated Dirk Burnaby, only the loss of him" (*TF* 474). There are indications that the three children are now moving forward with their lives. Juliet has become an attractive confident young woman (*TF* 477), Chandler has plans "to marry Melinda within the year and adopt Danya and he intends to resign his position as a junior high teacher and go to law school" (*TF* 475) and Royall "has become a full-time liberal arts student at Niagara University" working part-time "as an assistant in the geology department" (*TF* 471).

As Dean reminds us: "In her preface [to Linda Wagner's *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*], Oates calls the reality a writer presents 'mirrors reflecting mirrors – and each subtly distorting that hazy field we call 'reality!'"'[574] That the complete truth eludes the Burnaby children serves as a metaphorical reminder of the intangibility of truth. Through their

[573] Dean 529.
[574] Dean 527.

investigation, they are able to piece together a certain metaphorical truth[575] about their father though certain tangible facts are destined to remain permanently beyond their grasp. In the end, the investigation exposes much about the nature of life and knowledge, but relatively few precise details of the case, revealing the very fallible, human nature of the detective characters.

3.9.2.4. Absent

The discussion of *The Tattooed Girl* in the previous chapter led to the conclusion that it is the most thriller-like novel from our corpus because of the forward moving momentum created by the magnificently constructed chain of suspense. However, when we begin to examine the text from the specific angle of detection a gaping hole is revealed. Villains, there certainly are – Dmitri Meatte, Alma Busch, Jet Steadman Seigl – and crime is unquestionably omnipresent, yet where is the detective? This might be read as the indeterminacy of meaning in *Beasts* and *The Falls* taken to the extreme. The detectives in these two works are ineffective and can appear unnecessary. Thus, in *The Tattooed Girl* the character is completely omitted.

Certainly, as discussed in Part I, there is no end to the chain of trivial seeming questions and mysteries brought up by Seigl who wonders, among countless other things, "*How* is intimacy accomplished?" and does not understand why his love affair was ended by his partner: "For finally a door had been shut against him, disturbing as a riddle in a code Seigl couldn't crack" (*TTG* 5). He is also unsure of the worth of books to which a large portion of his life has been consecrated, asking "Why is this book so valued? Why is any book so valued?" (*TTG* 15). This temperamental protagonist identifies metaphysical dilemmas as well: "Disgusted with himself. These strange moods that were coming over him,

[575] In her essay "On Fiction in Fact," Oates states that in fiction "truth is understood to be metaphorical and not literal; subjective, and not objective" (76). This is the difference between fiction and historical fact. Although, she suggests, even fact is subject to the distorting powers of language and memory: "With the best of intentions, in recalling the past, if even a dream of the previous night, we are already altering – one might say violating – the original experience, which may have been wordless and was certainly improvised" (77).

short temper, willfulness, self-sabotaging. He wanted without knowing what he wanted" (*TTG* 19). These sorts of interrogations may a philosopher make, but they are not the right sort to justify the identification of Seigl as detective. A detective raises questions about concrete things that can be acted on. As it turns out, the sinister Dmitri Meatte is the closest character to a detective in Part I when he "wondered how [Alma]'d gotten to Carmel Heights. And why" (*TTG* 24), and when he wonders who had done Alma's tattoos (*TTG* 27). These are questions that someone somewhere ostensibly knows the answer to, although not Alma herself to whom his "investigation" is limited: "She told him she didn't know, didn't know who had marked her up. She didn't know their names" (*TTG* 29). However, it is not entirely clear whether she really does not know or is simply choosing to dissimulate, something that must be considered as a possibility since she is obviously afraid of parts of her past (*TTG* 57). The section closes, however, upon Seigl and Alma's encounter in the book store in which he is described as "consumed with curiosity" about how she came to be working there when she is not from the area "and wonder at himself" for reacting in such an uncharacteristic way (*TTG* 77). The word "curiosity" seems to promise the possibility of a more active role on Seigl's part in the pages to come. Yet "by nature Seigl was a philosopher" we are told (*TTG* 49). Accordingly, the nature of his implication in the events surrounding him will go no further than philosophical musings on his part.

In *The Tattooed Girl*, psychological elements are key. Granted, one might argue that a certain psychological component is the key to understanding all deviant behavior. However, in the case of this novel, psychologically tainted information is virtually all there is. There are no detectives or even detecting, properly speaking. Rather, as shown in Parts I and II, the story is constructed out of different points of view and the juxtaposition of conflicting perceptions. It is the reader who occupies the role of detective in this case, attempting to sift out the truth from the conflicting viewpoints presented. Kresge reminds us that in classic

detective fiction, the tacit "contract" between author and reader specified the reader be able to solve the puzzle with only the elements provided by the author. She reminds us also that as the author does not have the right to dissimulate evidence, they must find other ways to prolong the pleasure of the game, suggesting a variety of possible solutions.[576] The "game" of classic detective fiction is for the reader to be able to solve the puzzle from the information collected and presented throughout the text by the detective. Here, however, there is no outside third party; the narration is completely presented from the point of view of one or another of the main characters. In addition, the puzzle unorthodoxly consists of trying to guess the characteristics of a crime that has not yet been committed. The result is that the reader actually engages in proleptic detection, sifting through the conflicting points of view to make inferences about what is to come.

What does Oates give her public in terms of detectives and detecting? The examination of the ways in which the corpus works are and are not detective fiction in the previous chapter showed that although they each present certain salient characteristics of the genre, not one corresponds precisely to the common definition. The above study demonstrates that the same is true, to an even greater degree, concerning the act of detection. There seems to be a problem with the math. The combination of detective fiction elements do not order themselves into an entirely readable detective fiction result. In this way Oates's texts foreground both the experience of unreadability and the ethical moment in which the reader, responding to the text, creates his own interpretation of it, as discussed by Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading*.

Why use identifiable elements of detective fiction to ends other than those prescribed by the conventions of the genre? The classic detective story offered an optimistic vision to its readers, confirming for them the basic goodness of society. At the other extreme, the thriller

[576] Kresge 27.

adapted to society's newfound cynicism, confirming this time the inherently malignant nature of humanity. Each vision reflected the prevailing attitudes of its time, each conformed to a certain cultural conception of truth and each satisfied the desire for resolution. In an essay on Raymond Chandler's fiction, Oates points out the similarity between the two forms:

> [in the thriller] there is a tacit contract between writer and reader guaranteeing that the detective will triumph, as the life force must triumph. In this sense even the "hard-boiled" American detective novel is a British "cozy" – we are given to know that we are in safe hands, we need not fear chaos or the defeat of our deepest desires. The promise of the mystery-detective novel is that its beginning, its very opening statement, is simultaneously its ending, the terror of ambiguity resolved.[577]

Oates's detectives, however, occupy a middle ground between these two major types. It is a world where no absolute meaning can be established; there is some good and some bad, there are some reasons for optimism and other reasons for cynicism. Thus, it appears that Oates evokes both forms in order to undermine their visions and highlight the contemporary irrelevancy of absolutes. To this end, her detectives serve to accentuate the uncertainty of meaning; her structures serve to reinforce the absence of narrative authority. As an author cannot tell us the meaning of a work, a detective cannot tell us the true meaning of an event.

The absence of authorial guidance in these works parallels the post-humanist belief emanating from the corpus that undermines the humanist project of understanding, showing it to be unachievable. No one meaning can be found in the world and this is mirrored in the world of the texts by the inability of the detectives to uncover absolute truth at the narrative level and by the absence of narratorial responsibility at the structural level, no authorial voice points to one meaning over another. In "On Fiction in Fact" Oates emphasizes the notion of the intangible, metaphorical nature of truth, indeed of any idea that must be transmitted through the distorting lens of language. "Writing is an art and art means artifice, the

[577] Joyce Carol Oates, "Raymond Chandler: Genre and 'Art,'" *Where I've Been, And Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose* (New York: Plume, 1999) 102.

artificial," she writes. "That we are keenly aware of this today is a testimony to our higher standard of truth, no less than to our diminished expectation of encountering it."[578]

The revelations of this chapter seem to point to the possibility of extending Symons' book with the addition of another chapter. The title could be changed to "Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Borderline Novel." Thus, Symons' comments about the preoccupation of crime stories with violence can provide an appropriate segue into the next chapter. "We live in a time of especial violence," he remarks, "and how can that be expressed better than in a crime story which takes violence seriously? [...] I am not suggesting that there is any single or simple answer, only that the questions may perhaps be better posed through the account of individual acts of violence than in a long novel that conscientiously tries to count the number of dead."[579]

[578] Oates, "On Fiction" 77.
[579] Symons 289.

Chapter X
Violence and Identity

The previous discussion has been based upon Todorov's typology which has the benefit of being short and concise. However, though elements of Todorov's scheme can be identified in each of Oates's works under discussion, they correspond poorly to his detailed definitions. Either Oates's use of the conventions is deliberately subversive or Todorov's typology is too rigid and/or outdated. Indeed, I have suggested that Oates evokes the classic forms in order to rewrite them in an open-ended way that is more appropriate for the contemporary period. Theoreticians since Todorov have developed more comprehensive theories of the genre, insisting much more strongly on its relationship to violence. This chapter will discuss the theories of Jerry Palmer[580] and Julian Symons[581] and their import for this study of Oates's works.

3.10.1. Palmer's Hero and Conspiracy

As his title, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, indicates, Palmer limits his study to the thriller sub-type. Though this is seemingly a more restrictive viewpoint than the one I have emphasized, Palmer actually takes a more inclusive view and his reflections concerning violence, tone and point of view certainly have their relevance to our corpus. Palmer's definition of the thriller turns out to be a relatively simple one requiring only two elements: a hero and a conspiracy, "the hero, who is intrinsically competitive; and the conspiracy, which is intrinsically mysterious" (JP 82). These two elements form a pair. The conspiracy is inherently both mysterious and disruptive, explains Palmer, and "the hero is

[580] Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). Hereafter abbreviated as JP for in-text citations.
[581] Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1992). Hereafter abbreviated as JS for in-text citations.

responsible for unmasking [it]" so that "at the end the world can start its life again" (JP 53, 43). Later on in his book he adds to this initial outline, giving a list of four elements of the thriller: a detective hero, suspense, mystery, and the idea that crime is scandalous and non-justifiable (JP 135). These additional elements add nuance to the original ideas. To conspire means to plan to do something that is outside the realm of what society deems acceptable, hence the link between conspiracy and scandalous, unjustifiable crime. Suspense and mystery are elements generated by the originally opaque nature of the hero's relationship to the conspiracy.

Regarding the relationship between detective stories and thrillers, Palmer contends "that the so-called 'tough thriller' [...] and the traditional detective story are variations on the same theme, and that such differences as there are are insignificant in comparison with what they have in common" (JP 100). He identifies these commonalities as a conspiracy, a competitive hero and the process of suspense which is constructed out of the character triad, amateur – professional – bureaucrat; a kerygmatic encounter; and the cruelty of the villain. "In the thriller detective reason and action are always complementary, from Holmes to Bond," writes Palmer, justifying his claim that the two heroes are variations on the same theme. "As soon as one or the other is missing," he continues, "it is questionable whether what you have is really a thriller: abolish deductive reasoning, and you will effectively abolish the conspiracy; abolish action, and the thriller is reduced to a crossword puzzle devoid of suspense" (JP 103). This viewpoint in fact closely parallels that of Todorov, the two critics simply choosing to employ different terminology. Todorov's use of *roman policier* (detective fiction) foregrounds the detection and crime aspects, whereas Palmer's insistence on the word "thriller" puts much more emphasis on the suspense element.

It is easier to read our works as thrillers (or detective fiction) in terms of such a broadly posited definition for they are certainly all concerned with the unmasking of

conspiracies. Gillian unmasks the Harrows's sexual exploitation of young students, her actions effectively eliminating the threat. The Burnaby children uncover the conspiracy surrounding their father's death and in the end Dirk is restored to his rightful historical significance in the community. John Dromoor does not have to bring anything to light, but he does act, in his way, to set the world right, the very fact of the necessity of his actions pointing the finger at the lack of integrity of the Niagara Falls justice system. Only *The Tattooed Girl* poses a problem. Though suspense, mystery and conspiracy pervade the novel, there is no identifiable hero in Palmer's sense of the term. Indeed, the reader, due to the juxtaposition of multiple viewpoints, is the only one who is completely aware of the various conspiracies. Joshua Seigl is faced with a conspiring Alma Busch, however, not only does he fail to recognize the nature of his assistant's motives from the very beginning, too occupied with his own personal distress, he fails to recognize them at all. His understanding of her remains opaque from beginning to end. Ironically, Alma will reproduce the same pattern at the end of the novel. Engrossed in grief upon the loss of her employer, she will fail to recognize the danger presented by Jet. If we apply the same formula to *The Tattooed Girl* that appears in the others, namely that the author of the vigilante justice is the competitive hero, then Jet, a relatively minor character, would be the competitive hero of this work. In classic detective fiction, such a minor character is not allowed to be the culprit. However, a contemporary viewpoint emphasizes the notion of contingency and interconnectivity that is so important in Oates's work. Ironically, however, in *The Tattooed Girl*, Jet's justice is not delivered until after the guilty party has repented, and that without having caused the death she had planned, and so Jet, unlike the heroes of the other works, does not have the reader on her side.

3.10.1.1. Legitimacy of Violence

At the core of all stories dealing with crime – no matter how you label them – is the oversimplified duality of "good guy" (here, the hero) and "bad guy" (the conspirators). The legitimacy of the characters' acts is judged from this point of view, implying the existence of a double standard. Palmer points out that in thrillers, both characters participate in violent actions, but these are perceived differently by the reader. Surely, being doused with gasoline and lit on fire is no less inherently painful and violent than being gang raped and beaten to within an inch of life, yet in the world of *Rape: A Love Story* we do not accord them the same significance. Here, our point of view has less to do with the quality of the violent actions themselves than with the motives behind them.

Palmer writes that the motives of the villain are profit, revenge and power (JP 16). Material things are more important to him than people are and he partakes in "disgustingly illegal actions" (JP 19). The villain represents "sang-froid" and pitilessness and whereas violence on the part of the hero "exhilarates" the reader, violence on the part of the villain disgusts him (JP 20). This is indeed a crucial distinction as the act of taking a life is no less inherently violent when brought about by different means and for different reasons. For Palmer, these notions set the villain up as a character who is outside of society because he does things that are considered unacceptable according to society's moral code.

Palmer attributes the traditional thriller hero the "dubious status" of "insider-outsider" (JP 25). He is "inside" in that his actions are provoked by the desire to uphold society's moral values. He is "outside" because he possesses a set of skills that distinguish him from the common citizen. His ability to participate in violent acts against the villain both inspires gratitude and marginalizes him in the eyes of society. According to Palmer, the hero is "uniquely competent" and there is a necessary link between isolation and the demonstration of a unique competence (JP 27, 28). Thus, the hero is always alone (JP 33).

The difference in terms of the corpus works is that for the most part the "heroes" act in secret. Years later, Bethie has not forgotten how John Dromoor's private justice gave her and Teena back their lives. However, though he feels marginal, society cannot marginalize him for these actions, because they have not been made public. In these cases, "society" is represented by a very small portion of its constituent parts. Bethie knows and certainly recognizes the marginality of John Dromoor's status. The same is true regarding Gillian's part in the deaths of the Harrows (of which only she and the reader know) and Royall's possible implication in the death of Judge Stroughton Howell (of which his brother suspects). However, there is no doubt as to the legitimacy the reader attributes to these violent actions. The most interesting case, however, in terms of the question of legitimacy is perhaps the problematic *The Tattooed Girl*. The question concerns not the violence of the action itself, but its placement in the chronology. Had Oates chosen to cut the story short and place Jet's murder of Alma toward the middle of Part III, for example, when the latter is still searching for the right way to murder her employer, the result would have been something more akin to the other works with the legitimacy of the act established.

The idea of legitimate and illegitimate acts of violence recalls the anthropological philosopher René Girard's dichotomy of "beneficial violence" (*violence bénéfique*) and "evil violence" (*violence maléfique*). The former is a sacrificial act organized by the primitive community to periodically expunge violent tensions that have built up among its members whereas the latter form is detrimental to the community because it belongs to a mimetic cycle of retributive violence. The purpose of the former is therefore to keep the uncontrolled violence of the latter at bay, for, explains Girard, "unappeased violence seeks and always finds an alternate victim."[582] It is tempting to see the acts of violence deemed legitimate in this study's corpus works as "beneficial" and those considered illegitimate as "evil." However,

[582] My translation of: "La violence inassouvie cherche et finit toujours par trouver une victime de rechange." René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1972) 11.

Girard's theory does not, in fact, confirm such a view. The victim of a community's ritual sacrifice must be a scapegoat, in other words, an innocent who has nothing to do with any possible process of retributive violence. "The sacrifice," writes Girard, "prevents the seeds of violence from developing. It helps people keep violence at a distance."[583] In our contemporary society the preventive system of ritual sacrifice has been replaced by a judicial system charged with regulating and administering acts of vengeance. However, the violence depicted in Oates's novels, as in thrillers in general, whether performed by a "good" guy or a "bad" guy, belongs neither to a preventive sacrificial system nor to the regulated judicial system which the heroes bypass. Rather, it belongs to the retributive chain of "evil" violence from which communities have so long attempted to protect themselves and attests to the fact of man's inherently violent disposition. Is reading such stories enough to expunge a desire for violence, an intellectual substitution for an act of revenge? Or do the stories simply bear witness to the fact that human nature is as violent as it has ever been and has not really evolved since primitive times?

3.10.1.2. Distinctiveness of Tone

In addition to the hero and conspiracy elements, Palmer gives prime importance to the idea of tone and the importance of the impression left upon the reader at the close of the story. The difference of this impression, he claims, causes the thriller to be perceived either as "positive" or "negative." "The specificity of the thriller is that the hero averts a mysterious conspiracy: a conspiracy that springs up from nowhere, which produces events whose source is incomprehensible," writes Palmer. If, at the end of the story, the reader feels that the threat has been completely eliminated and the world returned to normal, it is what Palmer terms a positive thriller. "What the thriller asserts, at root, is that the world does not contain any

[583] My translation of: "Le sacrifice empêche les germes de violence de se développer. Il aide les hommes à tenir la vengeance en respect." Girard, *Violence et sacré* 33.

inherent sources of conflict: trouble comes from people who are rotten, but whose rottenness is in no way connected with the nature of the world they infect" (JP 87). The obverse of this impression, then, is that even though the end of the story has been reached, the reader does not feel that all is right with the world. "If the hero succeeds, but we are left with a sense of unease, we are in the presence of a thriller, but a 'Negative Thriller'" (JP 40-41). Palmer specifies what he means by a "sense of unease": "the reader's sense that the evil the hero has dealt with will reappear without difficulty in another form, and that the hero hasn't derived any personal satisfaction from fighting evil. He has done it because that's what he's there for" (JP 43). The tone of the negative thriller, in contrast to that of its positive counterpart, is described as flat and bleak, so much so that the negative thriller can be said to possess a certain "identity of tone" (JP 46). At the end of the novel, a "sense of emptiness" prevails (JP 49): "The reader is left with the feeling that although the hero has been duly heroic, and the conspiracy duly scotched, the world is no better a place for it" (JP 50). In other words, "we are convinced that the individual conspiracy has been dealt with, but not that all threats are over" (JP 66).

According to Palmer's analysis, a sense of bleakness and dissatisfaction are inherent to the genre:

> There is clearly a functional relationship between bleakness and the basic structure of the thriller. The world is necessarily an opaque and hostile world, where for some time the conspiracy must appear to be winning; and the hero must be isolated. Those fundamentals, clearly, can be interpreted as either glamorous or bleak – two alternative interpretations of the same phenomenon. Neither is truer to the thriller than the other; they are genuine alternatives. (JP 52)

At the close of *The Falls*, the Burnaby family is attending a memorial service in the park for Dirk Burnaby. The children have discovered the "truth" about his life and death and he is finally being honored for the status he rightly merits as initiator of the Love Canal lawsuit; there will be no more shame attached to the Burnaby name (*TF* 475). The simple caption

below their photo that will be printed in the next day's paper reads: "Family of Dirk Burnaby attends Prospect Park memorial." These are plain words but they are of profound significance to the family: "This simple declarative statement will be read and reread by each of the Burnabys as if it were poetry of surpassing beauty, containing a hidden meaning." (*TF* 479) All would finally appear to have worked out for the best for the Burnabys. And yet, the final paragraph reads as follows:

> It's a fact: elsewhere in Niagara Falls the air of September 21, 1978 is muggy, hardly breathable; of the texture of rotted fabric filtered through a corrosive mustardy sun. But here in Prospect Park, close by the Niagara Gorge, the air is fresh as if charged with electricity. You want to live: you want to live forever. The brass players, withdrawing from view, shaking spittle out of their gleaming instruments, are emissaries of wonder. On the gazebo platform, as the first stranger speaks, a vase filled with ice water glows with refracted light. Airborne particles of moisture, blown from The Falls, quiver with light. From time to time during the ninety-minute memorial for Dirk Burnaby 1917-1962 as the sun disappears and reappears between strips of tattered clouds, rainbows become visible above the Gorge. So faint, so frail, hardly more than optical illusions they seem. Look a second time, they're gone. (*TF* 481)

All may be right with the world at the memorial service in Prospect Park, but this brief reminder of "elsewhere" calls to attention the fact that it is not so everywhere. Outside of this fairy tale-like bubble, life looks bleaker. The poor quality of the air, the words "rotted" and "corrosive," call to mind the problems of industrial pollution in another part of the city, the fleeting rainbows seem to symbolize the fragility of happiness. Not to mention that the location of the site, at The Falls, not permanent when analyzed in terms of geological time, calls to mind the thoughts running through Chandler's head during his science lesson about the "terrible heartrending profound truths of time, mortality, human isolation in a godless universe. Truths of loss, annihilation" (*TF* 404). Though the Burnaby family, over the course of the novel, has arrived at a better place, we are reminded here that there has been no change to the fundamental principle of power relations which led to Dirk's death in the first place and no change to the delicate structure of happiness that defines the human condition.

Similarly, the juxtaposition of the final elements of *Rape: A Love Story* reveals that violence, no matter how legitimate, takes a toll. The final ten pages of the novella are divided into three short chapters. The penultimate chapter of Part II, entitled "Destroyed Son's Life," reports the death of the fourth rapist and concludes with his mother's anguished words demanding justice for the loss of her son (*RLS* 148). This is followed by a page bearing the heading "Heaven" which shows the representation of the written side of a postcard from Teena to her mother and daughter. Teena writes that she is in heaven and in love with her new life (*RLS* 149). Finally, Part III consists of the single chapter "Lonely." Here we return to Bethie as focalizer, these final two pages communicating a feeling of profound sadness. The sight of "a young police officer in uniform" reminds Bethie of John Dromoor and the traumatic events from her girlhood, sending her, as we have discussed, into a melancholic trance (*RLS* 153-154). Thus the ending leaves us with the impression that each of the characters involved will remain profoundly effected by the traumatic events related. Gladys Haaber has lost a son that she loved. Teena's new life is "heaven" in relation to what happened to end her old life, yet in order to reach this state she has had to leave her daughter and mother behind. Finally, Bethie is haunted by a secret sorrow that she cannot share with her husband.[584]

Finally, Jet's closing words in *The Tattooed Girl* – "It's over. There's justice now." – cannot help but leave us feeling profoundly disturbed (*TTG* 307). That Jet so blindly misinterprets certain information, accusing Alma of murdering her brother and stealing the Venetian glass necklace, and feels it in turn justifies her own action in fact foregrounds the exact opposite feeling. It is here that Oates chooses to end her narrative.

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[584] Mitchum Huehls writes about Freud's work on "the specifically temporal nature of trauma": "Because consciousness cannot absorb the traumatic event in the moment of its occurrence, Freud suggests that the time of the original event inflects all future times, thereby skewing temporal experience in general. Trauma is thus not of a moment, but instead spans an individual's temporal continuum, constituting her past, present, and future." "Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11's Timely Traumas," *Literature after 9/11*, eds. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (London: Routledge, 2008) 42-59. See Chapter 7 of this study for a discussion of this idea in relation to the corpus works.

3.10.1.3. Opacity of Point of View

The third central element of Palmer's theory of the thriller is that the "thrill" that comes from reading a work is directly related to the opacity of the world in which the hero evolves and the fact that the reader witnesses the events through the hero's point of view, rather than that of an omniscient narrator, for example: "The hero is always, initially, out-manoeuvred by the conspirators, for they have more knowledge of the circumstances than he does. The world that surrounds the thriller hero is always opaque" (JP 58). The reader only has access to the hero's point of view: "In the thriller, suspense derives from the adoption of a perspective that is associated first and foremost with a single individual" (JP 61). This is the technique referred to by Booth as the "isolated narrator" when he points out that "the success of many so-called hard-boiled detective and adventure stories written under the influence of Hemingway depends largely on the fear we feel as soon as we see danger as if through our own eyes."[585] Booth's idea of confusion is also related to Palmer's opacity: "Many stories require confusion in the reader, and the most effective way to achieve it is to use an observer who is himself confused."[586]

Beasts is the only work from the corpus that provides the same single point of view throughout and we have already discussed at length the opacity inherent in Gillian's account of events. However, the other works, though offering multiple viewpoints, still retain a certain degree of opacity because none of them include passages communicated by an entirely omniscient narrator. Each passage is told from one specific point of view and these can sometimes be contradictory as in the different perceptions of Alma shared by Dmitri Meatte and Joshua Seigl. Indeed, as we have seen, Oates's juxtaposition of viewpoints often seems to enhance the sense of mystery communicated by her texts rather than to diminish it.

[585] Booth 277.
[586] Booth 284.

Thus, these works present the main characteristics of thrillers in Palmer's wider sense of the genre: each character completely believes in the legitimacy of his violence, the tone exhibits characteristics of the negative thriller, and the points of view prevent the possibility of complete knowledge. Summarizing his analysis, Palmer finds that "the dominant element in the thriller is the combination of mystery, in the form of criminal conspiracy, and competitive individualism" (JP 144). Where the "detective" label fits our characters poorly, that of "competitive individualist" corresponds much better.[587] As discussed in the previous chapter, though the heroes do not do much in the way of actual detecting, they certainly act, meting out justice that conforms to their personal moral standards. It is the "mysterious conspiracy" element of Palmer's definition that is more problematic in the case of Oates's novels. As we have seen, Palmer describes this conspiracy as something "that springs up from nowhere," producing "events whose source is incomprehensible" (JP 86). However, the only crime that remains incomprehensible is the Harrows' abuse of the college girls in *Beasts*, this due to the first person narration of the novella. The other crimes in the stories are explicitly tied to their social contexts and the desire to preserve one's capacity for wish-fulfillment or to reestablish balance through revenge. Whereas in the traditional thriller, the conspiracy is the result of evil and malevolence, in Oates's texts (excepting the unexplainable actions of Dorcas and Andre Harrow), the conspiracy is expressly linked to the private lives of the characters and has to do with the choices they make concerning the relationships they enter into or the paths they choose to follow.

However, Palmer, like Todorov, allows room in his theory for the development of the form:

> The thriller formula itself becomes a starting point for interpreting the world, and the original material out of which it was constituted can be discarded and another analogous set substituted, provided that it offers the same possibilities

[587] Palmer's notion of "competitive individualist" is defined in opposition to other types of less pro-active characters such as those ineffective individuals he finds in the anti-thriller where "competitive individualism has been eliminated, and the individual is reduced to solitary inadequacy or to a bureaucratic function" (220).

> of a fictitious resolution of the contradiction between individuality and society. (JP 204)

However, even this concession does not succeed in accounting for the corpus. This notion of "resolution" is finally where the most problems arise because it implies the existence of a certain neutral basic state that can be returned to once the mystery has been cleared up and dealt with. Where these Oates works correspond the least to Palmer's definition of the thriller is in their dissimilarity to his claim that "in the thriller [crime] is fascinating because it is a disruption of an orderly world, and prompts the hero to action" (JP 146). Prompt the hero to action, it does indeed do. However, the background information provided about most of the characters points to worlds prior to the eruption of conspiracy that cannot be precisely described as orderly. Many of the characters are dealing with emotional problems linked to troubled personal pasts and their constant unanswered metaphysical questioning points to an inherent state of bewilderment that both pre- and post-cedes the timelines of the fictional texts. Rather than dramatizing conspiratorial interruptions into an otherwise orderly world, Oates's mysteries show that conspiracy is part of an inherently confusing world. Corresponding neither to Palmer's thriller, negative thriller, enforcer story or anti-thriller, Oates's texts nevertheless recall elements of each form, especially insofar as the legitimacy of violence is a major component of both Oates's fiction and the thriller as analyzed by Palmer.

3.10.2. Symons' Theory of Sensational Literature

Like Jerry Palmer, Julian Symons, in his *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, makes a case for a wider understanding of "crime fiction."[588] His work is a

[588] Symons prefers the term "crime fiction" because he considers "detective fiction" to be problematic for two reasons. First, it implies that one of the main characters in the story is a detective actively working to solve a crime. A strict application, then, could exclude other sorts of crime, mystery or investigation stories that do not involve detectives. Second, when Poe wrote "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (the first "detective" story), the word "detective" was unknown (29).

general history of the form in an attempt to support his claim that "*the detective story has changed into the crime novel*" (JS 191). To support his call for a more comprehensive definition, he points out that few, if any, books actually conform to all the rigid classifications originally set out (JS 2). All are built around the story of a crime; the difference is found in the point of view they adopt in relation to it: "Spy stories, and thrillers in general, do stand apart from books that pose a puzzle to the reader. The latter kind of book asks questions about Who or Why or How, sometimes about all three put together, where the thriller or spy story frequently just tells us How" (JS 4). However, one is no less interesting than another. "How," Symons asks, "can one weigh the puzzle interest of the detective story against the interest in characterization that marks the crime novel, especially when the detective story often contains some characterization and the crime novel often contains a puzzle?"[589]

Symons therefore downplays the importance of an analysis of sub-types within this genre, preferring instead that all sorts be considered under one general category of crime or suspense fiction. A pictorial representation of this theory would be possible in the form of a genealogical tree with "detective fiction" at the base and the other sub-forms evolving more or less directly out of it over time. Continuing with this metaphor of the family, we might say that over time the bloodline becomes more and more diluted, the original features mutating into what Symons calls a "hybrid creature": "The truth is that the detective story, along with the police story, the spy story and the thriller, all of them immensely popular in the past twenty years, makes up part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature." For Symons, "sensational literature" is literature that deals "with violent ends in a sensational way" (JS 4). He maintains that this new wider form that detective fiction has developed into is "flexible" and diverse allowing writers to use it in a variety of different ways and for a variety of different purposes:

[589] Symons 15. As with Palmer, Symons discusses only two categories where Todorov identified three. What Symons refers to as the "crime novel" would include both Todorov's thriller and suspense novel categories.

> This form of sensational literature is so flexible, and in its revival so comparatively fresh, that writers are trying to use it in very different ways. There are crime novelists who aim more or less consciously at blending the elements already mentioned into a story that has many of the values of a novel, and a few who work with a fairly distinct moral or social purpose. There are many who have given up most of the detective story's apparatus and offer a lively setting and credible characterization, but still write with a lightness of attitude that marks their books 'For Entertainment Only.' There are writers who attempt a realistic view of police work and procedure, writers whose books are basically psychological studies, and a few who have brought into the crime story the unusual element of wit. (JS 194-195)

Considering the difficulty encountered in Chapters 8 and 9 in attributing a sub-type label to these works by Oates, Symons' point of view is an attractive one. His statement about sensational literature is not very precise, however, and he never exactly explains what he means. What exactly is meant by treating "violent ends in a sensational way"? The *Webster's* dictionary offers the following definition of "sensational" that would seem to conform to the current discussion: "arousing or suited or designed to arouse a quick, intense, and usually superficial emotional response";[590] a definition which calls to mind the French term "*fait-divers*." In these terms, a case can easily be made for the sensationalism of the violent acts in our corpus. There is no doubt about the shocking and gruesome nature of Teena's gang rape, Gillian's sexual abuse, Alma's murder by stabbing, or Dirk's death by drowning.

3.10.2.1. Convey Psychological Truths, Investigate Human Personality

Symons would certainly agree with Todorov's idea of the thriller being constituted through a difference in the "milieu and behavior" described. He takes this reasoning a step further, though, when he identifies, in addition to a change in tone and setting, a change in authorial approach after World War II: "The new writers were inclined to ask Why rather than How, and their Why was often concerned with the psychological make-up and social background of killer and killed" (JS 168). The new themes dealt with by these writers "are

[590] "Sensational," def. 2a, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (1981).

those of the realistic and even brutal novel about real-life crime, the story based upon a setting conceived in such detail and with such firmness that the ambiance seems to dictate the crime, and the novel which uses a criminal theme as a means of investigating human psychology" (JS 170).

As seen in Parts I and II of this study, investigating human psychology is one of Oates's primary concerns. It appears, then, that Symons' theory of sensational literature provides a way of associating Oates's fiction – with its focus on human psychology, sensational violent acts and criminal themes – with the realm of detective fiction, not insofar as it is understood as formula fiction conforming to the detailed rules of any specific sub-type, but inasmuch as it can be conceived as a "hybrid creature" making use of various conventions as a means to exploring human psychology through its relationship to violence.

However, in the end Symons's analysis remains influenced by a humanist vision that cannot, in fact, account for Oates's crime stories. "What the modern crime story can do," he concludes, "is to say something of interest about our own time. The fine art of murder, as de Quincey called it, can tell us something about the world we live in, and about the best way of living peacefully in it" (JS 289). Clearly, any theory of detective fiction that posits such a role is antiquated when faced with the indeterminacy that pervades Oates's novels, an indeterminacy summarized by her observation in "Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque" that "the subjectivity that is the essence of the human is also the mystery that divides us irrevocably from one another" (*HTG* 307).

In this essay, Oates discusses the role of literature, particularly of the grotesque and horror fiction, in conveying states of mind, in touching an inner, inaccessible part of the soul. Her starting point is the question "why do these seemingly repellent states of mind [the "grotesque" and "horror"] possess, for some, an abiding attraction?" (*HTG* 303). The answer, she considers, lies somewhere in the opaque relationship between self and other. Oates

defines the grotesque as possessing "a blunt *physicality* that no amount of epistemological exegesis can exorcise. One might define it," she writes, "as the very antithesis of 'nice'" (*HTG* 304). Maurice Lévy, for his part, acknowledges that "the grotesque is often associated with a feeling of repulsion." However, he maintains that "the idea that dominates contemporary use of the word seems to be that of ambiguity or ambivalence, the crude expression of an unresolved conflict."[591] Both visions of the grotesque come together in relation to the role of violence in Oates's texts as the blunt physicality of the violence mentioned in the previous discussions of thriller themes is intimately related to the ambiguity of the characters' experiences.

3.10.3. Intimate Relationship to Violence

Palmer's insistence on the legitimacy of violence and Symons' emphasis on the sensationalism of violent ends both point to the central role of violence in this type of fiction. This constant treatment of violence is neither trivial nor gratuitous. Rather, Symons considers that crime fiction is one institution that treats violence particularly seriously (JS 289). Indeed, detective fiction and violence go hand in hand as violence has always been at the hidden heart of the genre. Even in the most classic detective stories where the reader does not actually witness the crime taking place, the existence of the story is based on the premise that violence has been committed and needs to be made sense of. Though the stories are not violent in their

[591] My translation of: "Il est un fait que le grotesque est souvent associé à un sentiment de répulsion. Mais l'idée qui domine, dans l'usage qu'on fait du mot aujourd'hui, semble bien être celle d'ambiguité ou d'ambivalence, exprimant de façon fruste un conflit irrésolu." Maurice Lévy, "Gothique, grotesque: Préface à l'ébauche d'une réflexion sur une possible relation," Collection: Rule Britannia, Numéro 3 *Regards européens sur le monde anglo-américain* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1992) 161. Mary Russo confirms the inward shift of the grotesque when she writes that "the shift of reference from discernible grotesque figures or style to the rather vague and mysterious adjectival category of 'experience' marks the modern turn towards a more active consideration of the grotesque as an interior event and as a potentially adventurous one." *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995) 7. Russo also observes that "the grotesque as uncanny moves inwards towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection, with the attendant risk of social inertia" (8). This is certainly a tendency that has been observed in Oates's characters.

"milieu and behavior described," their point of departure is the occurrence of the ultimate act of violence, that of suppressing another life. It is the sensational treatment of the violent acts evoked that is a "new" development, although one might quite reasonably point out counter-examples going back to the origins of the form, not the least of which are the violent deaths recounted in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Detective fiction therefore has an inherently intimate relationship to acts of violence. Another relationship that goes hand in hand is that between Oates's fiction and violence. The literary interviewer Michael Krasny makes the following comments about Oates in his *Off Mike: A Memoir of Talk Radio and Literary Life*, drawing a parallel between her personal experience and her subject matter:

> I try to understand how she is so attuned to the violence in America's underbellies and secret ravines. Her father's grandfather killed himself with a shotgun after trying to kill his wife. Her mother's father was killed. These became legends and myths never spoken of – but she was aware of them without knowing anything. [...] Her fear of violence is also her attraction to it. It is the haunting that has given much of her writing its form and life. [592]

Much has already been said about the violence in Oates's fiction, with numerous articles published on the subject. Indeed, the issue of violence is perhaps that which has been most debated by critics of Oates's work. Even today, most reviewers and critics feel obliged to mention this fact, at least as an aside, in their articles. The opening to Malena Watrous's 2009 review of *Little Bird of Heaven* is a typical example: "Often called the 'Dark Lady of American Letters,' Joyce Carol Oates is a controversial figure, simultaneously praised for her prolific versatility that can seem prurient."[593] In fact, the question "Why is your writing so violent?" has been put to her upon so many occasions there came a point that she could not stand the thought of being asked this one more time and wrote an article in response using the

[592] Michael Krasny, *Off Mike: A Memoir of Talk Radio and Literary Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008) 17.
[593] Malena Watrous, "Passion and Violence," *The New York Times Sunday Book Review Online* (17 September 2009).

question as title. She responds simply that her writing is no more violent than the world in which it originates:

> "Why is your writing so violent?" Since it is commonly understood that 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, it is always an insulting question; and it is always sexist.

Such an inquiry is sexist, she claims, because one would never ask the question of a male writer. Oates considers herself to be first and foremost a serious writer and considers that the job of the serious writer is to bear witness. She points out that her "writing isn't usually explicitly violent, but deals, most of the time, with the phenomenon of violence and its aftermath."[594] Indeed, when asked about her continuing attraction to the theme of abused women, Oates explains: "I think that we are all drawn to imagining and dramatizing stories in which there are victims whose experiences might otherwise remain unacknowledged, lacking language. The occasional complicity between victim and aggressor – overt, unconscious – is significant, too. Most of my stories about 'victims' evolve into stories of adjustment and growth, strategies of survival."[595]

Judith Van Heerswynghels analyzes the discourse of violence in Oates's early fiction, seeing in it "the constant presence [...] of a violence at the heart of all experience."[596] Her observations about Oates's use of violence mirror those that have emerged over the course of this study's examination of later works. Oates is not writing gratuitous violence for the pleasure of its shock value, Van Heerswynghels explains, rather, she considers the world to be an inherently violent place and so this idea is naturally translated into her fiction:

> Joyce Carol Oates shows us man as she sees him: violent by nature in a chaotic world. This vision is at the heart of all her fiction; violence is not simply one of

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[594] Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?" *New York Times Online* (29 March 1981).
[595] Johnson, "Fictions of New Millennium" 393.
[596] My translation of: "la présence constante [...] d'une violence qui informe toute expérience." Judith Van Heerswynghels, "Le discours de la violence dans la fiction de Joyce Carol Oates," *Le discours de la violence dans la culture américaine*, ed. Régis Durand (Lille: Publications de l'université de Lille III, 1979) 49. Her study is based on works from the first twelve years of Oates's career, starting with the first short story collection, *By the North Gate*, published in 1963 and continuing of to the 1975 collection *Marriages and Infidelities*.

> her favorite themes, rather, it inspires her writing: the artist can speak of nothing without describing it, all discourse is necessarily discourse on violence. At the thematic level, it is the subject *par excellence*, that which drives her writing and restrains her language; at the textual level, it constitutes the unifying motif of her fictional vision.[597]

According to Van Heerswynghels's analysis, this fascination with the constant struggle that is lived experience is translated into the author's work in several different ways including the depiction of "a dark, disconcerting universe, where violence erupts";[598] the use of vulnerability as a personality trait common to all of her characters;[599] and the representation of suffering as the means to discovery about self and world.[600] As for the origins of this violence, it grows out of a feeling of insecurity linked to the inherent mystery of the world. Violence in Oates, then, is closely linked to the unknown and the mystery of the Other:

> All that is unknown – the hidden power buried in the depths of one's being, the mystery of the Other, the inscrutable nature of life, love, death and all human experience – represents danger, which is why the questions asked by the characters are obsessive and punctuate the narrative, as if in an attempt to provoke a similar reaction in the reader.[601]

In 1970, Elizabeth Dalton complained that Oates's use of violence seemed unrealistic and overly literary and wrote of her acclaimed novel *them* that "the dosage of violence is so high and so regular that the reader becomes immune to it, and none of it seems to matter much." However, in spite of her feeling of revulsion, she finds something admirable in Oates's treatment of the theme: "All of her books treat insanity, sexual obsession, and violent death. We admire writers who deal with violence, perhaps because they attempt to confront

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[597] My translation of: "J.C. Oates nous montre l'homme tel qu'elle le voit – violent par nature dans un monde chaotique. C'est cette vision qui est à la base de toute sa fiction; la violence n'est pas un de ses thèmes favoris parmi d'autres, elle motive son écriture: l'artiste ne peut parler de rien sans la décrire, tout discours est forcément discours sur la violence. Au niveau du thème, elle est le sujet par excellence, celui qui force l'écriture et contraint le langage; au niveau de l'écriture, elle constitue le motif unificateur d'une vision romanesque." Van Heerswynghels 52.
[598] My translation of: "un univers noir et déconcertant, où déferle la violence." Van Heerswynghels 50.
[599] Van Heerswynghels 53.
[600] Van Heerswynghels 55.
[601] My translation of: "Tout ce qui est inconnu – force secrète enfouie au fond de l'être, mystère de l'Autre, caractère insondable de la vie, de l'amour, de la mort, de toute expérience humaine – constitue un danger, et c'est pourquoi les questions posées par les personnages ont un caractère obsessionnel et ponctuent le récit, comme pour éveiller un écho chez le lecteur." Van Heerswynghels 57.

the chaos that surrounds us and yet defies our comprehension – or perhaps because they have the courage to pursue their own imaginings to ultimate conclusions."[602] The violence in Oates's fiction perhaps evokes such ambivalent responses because as readers we find it difficult to accept the violence in our own lives which are inevitably filled with ambiguous, grotesque experiences that we prefer not to acknowledge.

Thus, Oates's grotesque vision illustrates a realm wherein violence and identity are intimately linked. Her lost, confused characters are not for the most part physical freaks – though the tattooed girl certainly is, as well as Dorcas whose physical appearance seems to match the exuberance of her artistic spirit. Rather, the repulsion they engender has less to do with their looks and more to do with their actions and reactions.[603] They might be considered as freaks of the soul. However, the term freak does not seem appropriate for a condition that seems to affect all of the characters equally. In this way, Oates adds another layer of complexity to her detective fiction plots, revealing, as we have seen, the limits of their rationality.

[602] Elizabeth Dalton, "Joyce Carol Oates: Violence in the Head," *Commentary* 49.6 (June 1970): 75, 76.
[603] In her 1979 doctoral dissertation *The Grotesque in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates*, Kathleen Burke Bloom concludes her study of the grotesque in Oates's early work, commenting that "by further distorting and exaggerating her portrait of a society that already distorts its members, she dramatically illustrates how often its obsessions lead, not to awakening or even survival, but to loss of control, madness, fragmentation, and death." (Loyola University of Chicago) 184.

Chapter XI
Rewriting Detective Fiction:
Towards an Understanding of Oates's Enigmatic Hybrid

After thoroughly discussing the nature of the enigma of Oates's plots through an analysis of the similarities and differences between the corpus works and detective fiction, the question that remains to be answered is what the point of such a fictional project might be. What effect does Oates's manipulation of detective fiction elements have on her readers? Is this even a valid question in light of Borges' remark that "all the great novels of the twentieth century are detective fiction"?[604] Borges' formula, writes Jean-Yves Pellegrin, indicates "the literary work is engaged in a quest for meaning in much the same way that a detective searches for the truth."[605] However, this study has shown that Oates's texts do not linearly converge towards a point of revelation of any one true meaning. Rather, they elude the formulation of any absolute truth through various evasive techniques, or they point to a plurality of coexisting meanings, aided, often, by a proliferation of points of view. Indeed, Oates has stated in a 2005 interview that the resolution that is usually expected by the reader of "the suspense thriller, the psychological, horror or detective novel" is "not [her] natural predilection."[606] Thus, the question Pellegrin poses about Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* seems equally relevant at this point in this study of Oates and detective fiction: "How is one to understand a narrative that assembles the themes and structures of a genre whose main concern is the manifestation of truth while at the same time imposing waiting and silence?"[607] Certainly, throughout this study, the open-endedness of much of Oates's work has

[604] My translation of: "Tous les grands romans du vingtième siècle, disait Borges, sont des romans policiers." Jorge-Luis Borges, cited by Jean-Yves Pellegrin, "'A thrust at truth and a lie': *The Crying of Lot 49* ou le langage en quête de vérité," *Crime Fictions: Subverted Codes and New Structures*, eds. François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery (Paris: PUPS, 2004) 71.
[605] My translation of: "l'œuvre littéraire [est] à la poursuite du sens comme un détective à la recherche de la vérité." Pellegrin 71.
[606] Araújo, "Joyce Carol Oates Reread" 99.
[607] My translation of: "Comment comprendre qu'un récit qui convoque les *topoï* et structures d'un genre dont la grande affaire est de manifester la vérité, s'impose ainsi l'attente et le silence?" Pellegrin 72.

been a major sticking point in terms of discussing it as detective fiction. This final chapter will explore the authorial intentions that might accompany the manipulation of the codes catalogued in the previous chapters. An initial general discussion of detective fiction and parody will eventually lead to an application of the concepts to the specific case of Oates's texts.

3.11.1. Thriller as Parody of Classic Detective Fiction

Benoît Tadié's theory of the genesis of the thriller form provides the description of a process of literary evolution by which it will be possible to better assess Oates's choices regarding the genre. His analysis of the thriller as parody of classic detective fiction makes it clear that the forms are engaged in an active relationship, rather then simply passively connected through filial ties. Once again, a bit of historical background is necessary. Tadié analyzes detective fiction in its two major forms – classic detective fiction (*le roman à énigme*) and thriller (*le polar*) – as explicitly linked to the historical periods out of which they developed: the former out of the context of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, the latter out of the alienating twentieth century urban environment. Yet it is not a question of two separate entities developing independently. Rather the two sub-types are joined in a sort of familial relation, the latter evolving in reaction to the former, the two separated in a manifestation of a literary generation gap. Thus, the thriller exists in a triangular relationship, owing its creation to both the contemporary political context of the 1920s, as a disillusioned post-war period, and the popularity of the classic detective story that preceded it:

> Hence, our principal hypothesis: the thriller reveals the mutations in the literary, social, cultural and ideological domains around this collective traumatic event and embodies in its own way, as do the *avant-gardes* of the 1920s, the rupture that has occurred with the world and illusions of the pre-war period. [608]

[608] My translation of: "De là, notre thèse principale : le polar révèle les mutations du champ littéraire, social, culturel et idéologique autour de cet événement collectif traumatique, et incarne, à sa manière et au même titre

Up to this point, Tadié's arguments are basically similar to those of Todorov, Hamilton, Palmer and Symons discussed previously. However, a final element colors and adds depth of meaning to Tadié's explanation of the germination of the thriller, not by contradicting the theories of those that preceded him, rather by further developing a complementary point, exploring the role nationality played in the development of the latter form due in part to the desire felt by Americans to distinguish themselves, including in the realm of language, from their former British colonizers. Classic detective fiction, of course, was a very British genre. Thus the genesis of the thriller (or hard-boiled detective story), in Tadié's analysis, is a very complex phenomenon, contingent both upon the desire to create a new form able to communicate the malaise of the post-war period as opposed to pre-war optimism (which finds its literary equivalent in the order and control so prized in the classic detective story), and upon the need for emancipation manifested in the liberating qualities of creating a new language adapted both to the nation and to the time.

Various nineteenth and early twentieth century projects to create a formal "American" language different from English are discussed in Tadié's first chapter.[609] Eventually, he explains, the power shift (both political and cultural) that took place around 1920 caused the American dialect to gain prominence, making a moot point of promoting specifically "American" language projects. Nevertheless, the fact that these currents existed across the country for over a century illustrates the strong desire of the young nation to be able to distinguish itself through language, an aspect which is such an integral part of the development of the thriller, as shown by Todorov's insistence on the importance of discourse to the form. Tadié makes the evolution from English classic detective fiction to American

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que les avant-gardes des années 1920, la rupture avec le monde et les illusions d'avant guerre." Tadié, *Le polar américain* 22.

[609] Among the examples cited by Tadié are the adoption in 1923 by the Illinois legislature of a bill proclaiming "American" to be the official language of the state as opposed to "English" and Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* first published in 1828 (27).

thriller apparent through an example of an intermediate form, a late nineteenth century American pulp story, "Nick Carter at Headquarters," where proper English appeared as the master language and the American dialect as simply a bastardization of the upper class mother tongue. "Nick Carter-style stories," he explains

> which present American idiom as a dialectical and decadent variation on a regulated British norm, therefore involve not only a style, but also a type of scenario and an ideology which are very different compared to those of the hard-boiled novels of the 1920s. The novel may very well take place in New York, but it only reproduces the processes, figures and anxieties of the sensational Victorian Novel: disguises and ventriloquy, multiple identities, obscure family relations [...] and, above all [...] uneasy suspicion cast on the figure of the gentleman, a pillar of the English ethos.[610]

The Nick Carter stories example illustrates an intermediary period during which classic detective fiction was being written on American soil, but in an English way, typically American speech patterns and vocabulary existing only in the direct speech of lowly, uneducated characters. This latter linguistic phenomenon was eventually to take over completely with the publication of the very first hard-boiled story, attributed to the writer Carroll John Daly:[611]

> the important thing is to recognize that the thriller is born at the moment when American orality shifts from the dialogue to the narration itself. In a Copernican revolution, the Anglo-centric "Nick Carter" detective stories thus give way to the American-centered thriller.[612]

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[610] My translation of: "Le récit à la Nick Carter, qui projette l'idiome américain comme variation dialectale et décadente d'une norme britannique policée, implique donc non seulement un style, mais aussi un type de scénario et une idéologie très différents de ceux du roman hard-boiled des années 1920. La nouvelle a beau être située à New York, elle ne fait que reconduire les procédés, les figures et les angoisses du roman à sensation victorien: déguisement et ventriologuie, identités multiples, relations familiales occultes […] et, surtout […] soupçon inquiet jeté sur la figure du gentleman, pilier de l'*ethos* anglais." Tadié, *Le polar américain* 35.

[611] Daly's first thriller "The False Burton Combs" appeared in a December 1922 issue of *Black Mask*, six months before the appearance of Hammett's first thriller "Arson Plus" (Tadié *Le polar américain* 36, 58). However, the critical debate about the attribution of the first thriller is not pertinent to my analysis. I am simply trying in broad general terms to establish the development of the thriller in terms of contemporary historical context and its relation to an established literary tradition.

[612] My translation of: "l'important est de reconnaître que le polar naît au moment où l'oralité américaine glisse du dialogue vers l'instance de narration. En une révolution copernicienne, l'anglocentrisme des récits policiers à la 'Nick Carter' cède alors la place à l'américanocentrisme du polar." Tadié, *Le polar américain* 36.

Thus, for Tadié, the thriller is born once American orality begins to pervade the whole text, not only at the level of dialogue, but also at the level of narration. The new hard-boiled language is described by Tadié in the following way:

> Its openly oral expression tends toward simplicity and the concrete, avoiding that which belongs to the realm of feelings, favoring nouns and verbs rather than adjectives and adverbs. It is characterized by a limited monosyllabic vocabulary which avoids originality and refinement and through its flat, linear, repetitive, energetic diction contrasts with the perceived verticality of the delicate nuances of the British accent.[613]

The development of thriller out of classic detective story is at once chronologically evolutive and historically concurrent. Indeed, the classic detective story reached its climax during the first decade of the thriller's golden age, the 1920s. However, the juxtaposition of the two forms (Tadié compares the works of Van Dine and Hammett) only serves to emphasize their differences and accentuate the parodic relationship of latter to former. Such an exercise makes it all the more apparent that the two forms are opposed both in their language and in their content: "A few lines are enough to show the gap which separates Hammett and Van Dine: Hammett's thrillers are violent, democratic, Protestant, American; Van Dine's novels are suave, aristocratic, Catholic, English."[614] The process of comparison executed by Tadié makes apparent the fact that the thriller defines itself (at its inception) in opposition to its predecessor, a notion which is explicitly voiced by its characters, proving the familial relationship between the two. Tadié points out that thriller detectives frequently make ironic comments about being men of action who feel themselves to be above the passive recourse to mental processes, men for whom collecting clues like a "good detective" would be useless:

> One could site multiple examples of this type of parodic reference. They show that, contrary to the general conceived notion that the thriller is an autonomous

[613] My translation of: "Son expression, ouvertement oralisée, tend vers la simplicité et le concret, évitant ce qui est de l'ordre du sentiment, privilégiant le nom et le verbe par rapport à l'adjectif et à l'adverbe. Elle se caractérise par un vocabulaire limité, monosyllabique, qui fuit la recherche et le raffinement, et par une diction plate, linéaire, répétitive, énergique, contrastant avec la perception verticale d'un anglais britannique aux délicates nuances d'accent." Tadié, *Le polar américain* 37.

[614] My translation of: "Quelques lignes suffisent pour percevoir le gouffre qui sépare Hammett et Van Dine: le polar selon Hammett est violent, démocratique, protestant, américain; le roman à la Van Dine, suave, aristocratique, catholique, anglais." Tadié, *Le polar américain* 40.

> genre, it has been elaborated as a dialogue with the ancestral detective fiction model. However, it systematically devalues this model in order to impose its own language, figures, mythology and scenarios.[615]

Tadié's analysis of the importance of language in the development of the thriller has served to establish the precedent of parody in the genre's evolution and mutation. At this point, the notion of innovative use of language provides a clue by which to better conceptualize the process at work in Oates's texts. Indeed, a parallel might be drawn between the classic detective fiction/thriller relationship as described by Tadié and the relationship between detective fiction in general and Oates's version of it as discussed in this study. As the writers of the first American thrillers adapted the language of detective fiction to suit the particular needs of their time and place, insisting on the simple, concrete, energetic nature of American orality, so Joyce Carol Oates has taken detective fiction and bent its characteristics to fit her own personal language. As shown in Part I, whether it be in her non-fiction or fiction work, Oates has a consistent way of expressing herself that foregrounds her fascination with the mysteries of life.[616] Such an observation would tend to indicate that the use of detective fiction elements in Oates's *The Falls, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* can also be read as parodic. To this end, I turn first to a discussion of Margaret Rose's theory of parody and a few brief comments on an indisputably parodic work of detective fiction from Oates's oeuvre, *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, that will furnish a point of comparison.

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[615] My translation of: "On pourrait multiplier ces exemples de références parodiques. Ils démontrent que, contrairement à l'idée généralement admise selon laquelle le polar est un genre autonome, il s'est au contraire élaboré dans un dialogue avec le modèle ancestral du roman à énigme. Mais ce modèle, il le dévalue systémiquement pour imposer son langage, ses figures, sa mythologie et ses scénarios." Tadié, *Le polar américain* 43.

[616] This is also true of her "Joyce Carol Oates" writing or work published under a pseudonym. Brenda Daly's article "The Art of Democracy: Photography in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates/Rosamund Smith" discusses the Joyce Carol Oates novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* and the Rosamund Smith anti-thriller *The Barrens*. While Daly insists on "the need to read Oates and Smith as separate authorial identities" (457) her article stresses the similarities between the novels and shows that the works expound the same democratic vision and share certain themes related to interconnectedness, mystery of identity, doubles and notions of good and evil.

3.11.2. Refunctioning: Margaret Rose's Concept of Parody

Margaret Rose is adamant that the concept of parody has historically been misunderstood; many descriptions over the years have been too restrictive, she claims, often reducing parody to the ridiculous, absurd or burlesque, to a simple imitation of form, or, more recently, to the intertextual. To avoid potential confusion, I have chosen to adopt Rose's concept of parody as the point from which to conduct my discussion. In *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, Rose offers the following general definition of parody as "*the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material*," further explaining that

> by incorporating parts of the target text into the parody, parodists can both ensure the closeness to a target necessary for an accurate firing of their critical arrows and preserve the essential feature of the target which will make the parody outlive the demise of the parodied work's readership.[617]

Before coming to this conclusion, however, she thoroughly analyzes the ancient origins of the form. Etymologically, the word parody comes from the ancient Greek nouns "parodia" and "parode" and the verb "parodeo" and comedy was an important part of the equation from the very beginning. Documents surviving from ancient times

> suggest that the 'parodia' could imitate both the form and subject-matter of the heroic epics, and create humour by then rewriting the plot or characters so that there was some comic contrast with the more 'serious' epic form of the work, and/or create comedy by mixing references to the more serious aspects and characters of the epic with comically lowly and inappropriate figures from the everyday or animal world.[618]

Parody, therefore, was understood as being humorous in the sense of producing effects characteristic of the comic. The idea of parody, then, cannot be separated from that of "comedy," or, more precisely, comic incongruity, "be it a dissimilarity or an inappropriate similarity between texts."[619] In addition, it is important to remember that the comic effect attributed to parody by the ancients was not necessarily ridiculous: "If aspects of ridicule or

[617] Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993) 52.
[618] Rose 15.
[619] Rose 32.

mockery were present these were additional to its other functions and were co-existent with the parody's ambivalent renewal of its target or targets."[620] Rose elaborates on the idea of the comic:

> The dictum that the essence of humour has resided in raising an expectation for X and giving Y, or something else which is 'not entirely X', instead is also particularly well suited to describing the mechanism at work in parody when a text is quoted and the quotation then distorted or changed into something else.

The contrast between original and new texts used to create the comic incongruity in parody may take on several forms: contrasting "the serious with the absurd as well as the 'high' with the 'low', or the ancient with the modern, the pious with the impious, and so on."[621] This comic incongruity plays upon the expectations of the reader of the literary parody and can comment, directly or indirectly, upon them.

Oates's *Mysteries of Winterthurn* provides a concrete example of what Rose describes as the "comic refunctioning" at work in parody.[622] Through its title and incipit, the text raises an expectation for a classic detective story ("Herewith, I am happy to present that perennial favorite of *aficionados* of American mystery, *The Virgin in the Rose-Bower*; or, *The Tragedy of Glen Mawr Manor*" (*MW* 3)) while the story itself gradually undermines this structure. The story opens in typical fashion; a murder has been committed in a locked-room. However, things quickly start falling apart. Notably, the detective, Xavier Kilgarvan, is but a mere inexperienced lad of sixteen who considers this "mystery" to be his first case and is caught up in the frustrating realization that real-life investigations do not always go as smoothly as those he has read about in books; he is unable to "detect" in the way all his heroes have done. As a result, for more than a hundred pages, we follow the story of a detective who does very little actual detecting and never satisfactorily solves the case. At one point, when an examination of several slaughtered lambs proves emotionally difficult, Xavier reflects the following:

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[620] Rose 25.
[621] Rose 33.
[622] Another example is Oates's short story "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" discussed earlier in Chapter 7 as a rewriting of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*.

> When the great Vidocq came upon murdered men and women, or, indeed, had a hand in murdering them himself; when Jonathon Whicher of the original 'Scotland Yard' examined a corpse; when such amateur detectives as Dupin and Holmes arrived at the scene of a crime – why, it had never seemed to greatly distress them that an actual physical presence lay before them: nor did it strike the reader, by way of the language employed, that *something had truly occurred* of an *irreversible* and *irremediable* sort. (*MW* 63)

The comedy in this case lies in the discrepancy between the content of traditional detective stories and the content of this story, a discrepancy centered around the dichotomy between fictional worlds and real life. In addition, we can note the ironic tone and the meta-fictional references.

Rose also seeks to discredit the preconceived notion that parody can only be considered as such by a reader who is familiar with the work, or themes, being parodied. This is not the case, she explains, because parody's peculiar dual structure allows it to have an ambivalent, or ambiguous relationship to its target: "the parody itself keeps its target alive to at least some extent by quoting or imitating something of it within itself."[623] By extension, "the parody may still be said to be 'comic' even when its comic aspects are not noticed or understood by a recipient." The incongruity between parody and parodied text produces "the comic effects which act as an indication of the presence of comic parody to the reader." This incongruity, and therefore the comic effect, exists whether the reader can identify it or not (though Rose considers that readers can learn the signals for comic parody and therefore become more aware of an author's comic intent by such means). Rose looks for the comic in parody "in the creation of any type of comic incongruity, be it a dissimilarity or an inappropriate similarity between texts." This point is all the more important because it is this "controlled discrepancy or incongruity between the parodied text and its new context [...] which distinguishes the parody from other types of literary criticism as well as from forgery and plagiarism."[624] Returning to the above example from Oates, if the reader happened to be

[623] Rose 47.
[624] Rose 32.

unfamiliar with detective fiction it would still be possible to appreciate the parody at work in *Mysteries of Winterthurn* because a structure is put in place that follows an investigation and the text both makes references to fictional detectives and contrasts their exploits with those of its own detective. Therefore, at least in this case, the reader can appreciate the parody of the detective story in general without being an adept of the genre or identifying a specific intertext, as Xavier's comments make it clear that his "real" life experiences are disappointing when contrasted with the expectations acquired through his reading, and certainly all readers can appreciate the fact that there exists a discrepancy between fiction and real life.

However, Oates's text may also be read as a parody of a specific text, namely Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which it turns out the perpetrator of Mme l'Esplanaye's and her daughter's deaths was an orangutan. The critic Uri Eisenzweig asserts that the orangutan is a "non-identity."[625] It is not guilty of a crime because it is not ruled by the confines of human society. In his view, no crime was committed; the incident related in Poe's story was simply an accident, so there is no criminal and therefore no guilt. Oates's text can be read as a parody of Poe's text if we follow the same reasoning because in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, though the case is never officially solved, it is made clear that the two "murders" in the locked-room were committed by supernatural baby angels representing the psychological anguish resulting from a father's incestuous affair with his daughter. These two deaths may also be viewed as accidents, involving no criminal and no guilt on the part of the perpetrators. Oates's parody takes the concept of "non-identity" one step further, into the realm of the supernatural, thus forcing her detective story out of the bounds traditionally accepted by the rules of the genre. I will return to a discussion of Poe's story and Eisenzweig's theory in the next section.

[625] In Chapter 7 I discussed how the concept of identity is problematic in cases of borderline disorders of which Oates's characters manifest many characteristics. Similarly to Eisenzweig's argument about the orangutan in Poe's story, we might ask whether Oates's characters, in the throes of identity crises of their own, can be considered "guilty" of crimes.

Once the definition of parody has been straightened out, a neighboring issue remains, namely that of the reason for it. Rose remarks that attitudes of parodists have generally been described as either mocking or sympathetic and admiring, two very different positions. In fact, problems have arisen around the meaning of the word because of the ambiguity of its prefix "para" which can be translated to mean both nearness and opposition. The ambivalence associated with this dual meaning, which "can be said to be implied in the classical understanding of it as a song sung 'in imitation of', and as both 'next to' and 'different from' another," is central to parody's complexity and should not be reduced to just one or the other aspect as many post-Renaissance theorists have done, separating parody into *either* opposition *or* consonance.[626] The fact that parody is ambivalently dependent upon the object of its criticism for its own reception is key to the understanding of parody because it is precisely this aspect which allows us to distinguish parody from forms of satire or burlesque which do not make their target a significant part of themselves. In addition, writes Rose, "this ambivalence may entail not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new."[627]

The process Rose describes here is the same one that Tadié describes in specific relation to detective fiction when he follows the historical development of the thriller as a parody of classic detective fiction, showing how certain elements remain and others are modified in the creation of the later form. It is the same process at work in Oates's *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. Oates acknowledges her re-visioning of genre in this novel:

> Aficionados of classic American murder cases will recognize here, in transmogrified and modulated forms, certain old favorites about which I dare not be more specific, for fear of revealing too much. The fictional cases are meant to bear a sort of dreamlike (or nightmarelike) relationship to the originals, one or two of which have never been satisfactorily solved; but they have been chosen because they deal with ongoing themes of the quartet – the

[626] Rose 49.
[627] Rose 51.

> wrongs perpetrated against women, for instance, and the vicious class and race warfare that has constituted much of America's domestic history.[628]

I have already mentioned how Oates is able to make meta-fictional comments while at the same time setting up comic incongruity. The following is another example from *Mysteries of Winterthurn*:

> Xavier moved away, to make a final cursory examination of the room: and to tax himself with Monsieur Dupin's admonition as to the *simplicity* of the situation. "Yet," he thought, "is it not invariably, and smugly, the case that any human situation can be defined as *simple* by those who dwell, as it were, above it; and refined out of temporal existence by one or another authorial stratagem? For if one dwells here below, in the very midst of the puzzle, the navigation of the next hour, - nay, the next *minute* – is a challenge." (*MW* 104)

Whereas *Mysteries of Winterthurn* is quite clearly a parody, the four works discussed in this study, if they are parodies, are less blatantly so. The self-referentiality of the passages quoted above, for example, deliberately repurposes codes of classic detective fiction to enhance the feeling of mystery and open-endedness in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. Yet, though *The Falls, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* also repurpose genre codes with the effect of enhancing mysteriousness, the third element of the earlier equation, the self-reflexivity, is not present. This raises the question of whether or not these works can be considered parodies. To fit the label, says Rose, a work must involve the "comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic material."

The distinction is a difficult one. Let us take another look at the Dromoor character from *Rape: A Love Story*. Is this character is a hard-boiled detective hero or is he a parody of the hard-boiled hero? As we have seen, his characteristics largely correspond to those of the traditional type. Raymond Chandler's description of the hard-boiled detective hero might easily be applied to Dromoor:

> But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a

[628] Oates, "Five Prefaces: 3. *Mysteries of Winterthurn*" 374.

> common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. [...]
>
> He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due a dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks – that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness.
>
> The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in.[629]

Indeed, the appropriateness with which these words apply to Dromoor is striking. Oates's character is a perfect match to Chandler's detective hero even down to the hidden truth after which he quests, the point of equilibrium on the scale of justice. How safe the world would be for women if it were only peopled with the appropriate number of similar characters. One might even imagine that after a time, there would be no more rapists. Oates's repurposing, then, does not concern the character of the hard-boiled detective hero.

Similarly, Oates's Niagara Falls with its judge who appears to be in tacit cahoots with a prominent defense attorney, corresponds to the world of the "realist in murder" described by Chandler, in spirit if not precisely in letter:

> a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing; a world where you may witness a holdup in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the holdup men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury

[629] Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder: An Essay," *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950; New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 18.

> of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge.[630]

Thus, the nature of the detective hero and the environment within which he evolves remain clearly identifiable as hard-boiled hero and hard-boiled "realist" environment. However, the overall effect is different in *Rape: A Love Story* because these elements have been transposed onto a contemporary setting and into a different fictional environment. The spirit of the elements remains unchanged, but the structure into which they are placed, notably Oates's strategy of developing multiple points of view, is different.

It is as if, for example, "The Murders In The Rue Morgue" had been written centered around the same violent crime, but expanded into novel length by the addition of multiple viewpoints – the victims, police officers, witnesses, the sailor, even, perhaps, the orangutan – thus humanizing the affair and emphasizing the breakdown in society that allowed it to happen.[631] Similarly, one might imagine that if only Dromoor's point of view were represented in *Rape: A Love Story*, the case would appear much more straightforward and the feeling of uneasiness and lingering trauma evoked by Bethie's closing narrative would most likely be avoided. This observation makes it possible to situate Oates's work on the evolutionary timeline of the genre outlined by Todorov. The thriller sub-type developed out of a shift in themes. Oates's fiction retains the thriller themes but effects a shift at the level of discourse (the second story line, that of the investigation), altering the "rules" pertaining to the rationality of explanations, the place for descriptions and psychological analyses, the author:reader / criminal:detective homology, and the use of banal situations and solutions. Whereas she does not allow for supernatural solutions to the crimes in these stories, she certainly shows, through her use of dispersed subjects, that there is not necessarily a rational explanation for them. Likewise, the use of multiple viewpoints nullifies the above homology.

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[630] Chandler 17.

[631] Indeed, this is exactly what Oates does in her "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" which tells the story of *The Turn of the Screw* from the perspective of characters who remain voiceless in the original.

Finally, descriptions, psychological analyses, banal situations and solutions appear frequently. Thus, Oates's form of detective fiction, with its emphasis on dispersion and spectrality and its insistance on the important role of ordinary elements of life, is one that foregrounds the human dimension by asserting the democratic, all-pervasive nature of mystery.

At this point it might be objected that *Beasts* has no recourse to multiple points of view. This is certainly true. However, the above observation regarding the discourse shift still holds true. Even the classic homology is shifted because the criminal and the detective are one and the same character. Indeed, Oates innovates at the level of discourse to provide a voice to those who typically remain voiceless in the fictional worlds of detective fiction, namely the victims and the criminals. Indeed, though different characteristic elements of detective fiction are used in each novel, the discourse shift is what the four works have in common.

Therefore, the principal element of detective fiction that Oates parodies is that of the isolated hero. Her use of shifting point-of-view shows that her "detectives" are entangled in life's web, not set apart from it, they are only marginal in the sense that everyone is marginal if one only knows his individual story. Other parodied elements descend directly from this primary one. It is the dispersed narrative technique that makes it impossible to provide a unified rational narrative as a solution to crimes. It is this same technique that is responsible for blurring the clear line between good and evil. Comic discrepancy is present in the reader's identification of detective fiction elements such as plot, cast of characters, and fictional environment that have been shifted into an unusual and unexpected discursive structure.

3.11.3. Return to Roots: Oates and Poe

Many critics have remarked upon affinities between Oates's writing and the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Two random examples include Steven Barza who points to the attraction to fear shared by characters of both authors – "As in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, the characters

relish their fright."[632] – and Bruce Michelson who mentions the complex feeling of yearning and horror that inhabits works of each: "Beyond the haunted houses, the rapists, killers, suicidal, dangerous lovers, and buried crimes which populate the fiction, the larger, more genuine suspense that Oates can conjure up often has to do with a kind of destructive transcendence of the self, observed with an admixture of yearning and horror reminiscent at times of Poe."[633] Since, Oates has explicitly reinforced the textual relationship between herself and her literary ancestor by parodying Poe's detective Dupin in her 1984 *Mysteries of Winterthurn* and by publishing, in 1994, a story collection entitled *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, a title which recalls *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* published in 1840 by Poe whom she calls, in the afterword, "our greatest, and most beleaguered, artist of the grotesque" (*HTG* 304). In addition, the collection includes a story called "The White Cat" which is a parody of Poe's "The Black Cat."[634] However, Oates goes even further than admitting a personal debt to Poe, attributing to him a universal and incalculable influence on general culture: "Poe's influence upon the literature of the grotesque – and the mystery-detective genre – has been so universal as to be incalculable. Who has *not* been influenced by Poe? – however, obliquely, indirectly; however the influence, absorbed in adolescence or even in childhood, would seem to be far behind us" (*HTG* 305). Oates's view is far from unique, of course. It is shared, for example, by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney who write that "the 'metaphysical art' that Poe found lacking in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*, he notably originated and skillfully developed in his own work, bequeathing it in full

[632] Barza 147.
[633] Bruce Michelson, Preface, *Joyce Carol Oates: An Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Francine Lercangée (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986) xvi.
[634] My Masters thesis, "Parodie et méta-fiction: le dialogue de Joyce Carol Oates avec le passé," explores aspects of parody and metafiction in Oates's "The White Cat." They have also been discussed in an article by Marita Nadal entitled "Variations on the Grotesque: From Poe's 'The Black Cat' to Oates's 'The White Cat,'" *The Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 57.3 (Summer 2004): 455-471.

measure to his literary heirs: all the writers of the detective story, whether classical, hard-boiled, metaphysical, or some other category yet to be devised."[635]

The relationship between the writing of Oates and Poe becomes particularly pertinent in the context of our discussion of detective fiction as Poe is attributed with inventing the genre. In his analysis of "The Murders In The Rue Morgue," Poe's first detective story, Henri Justin points out that all of the prescribed elements of the future genre are to be found in it including the body that necessitates the investigation into the guilty party, the single amateur detective hero whose investigation is narrated after the fact by a close friend and assistant and who can reappear in future stories of future investigations, and the use of red herrings to draw the reader off track. However, writes Justin, "The Murders In The Rue Morgue" is not a simple detective story of the type that would come to be formulated by Wilkie Collins, Emile Gaboriau and Arthur Conan Doyle, it is also a parody of such a detective story:

> that the "murderer" is revealed to be an innocent animal which the authorities will quietly entrust to the care of the botanical gardens pushes a bit far the notion of restoring the social order. The genre has barely been invented and it is already becoming its own first parody, an observation which invites a rereading of the text.[636]

Thus, at the heart of a genre which traditionally focuses on the discovery of identity, that of the unknown assassin, other type of criminal or wrong-doer, is a paradoxical focus on a non-identity.

Uri Eisenzweig has developed this concept in his article "L'instance du policier dans le romanesque: Balzac, Poe et le mystère de la chambre close" ("The case of enigma in the novel: Balzac, Poe and the locked-room mystery") in which he discusses the relationship between traditional novel and detective novel through a comparison of Balzac's *Maître*

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[635] Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story," *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 14.

[636] My translation of: "que le "meurtrier" se révèle être un innocent animal que la force publique va gentiment confier à la ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, voilà qui pousse un peu loin le bouchon du retour à l'ordre social. A peine inventé, le genre verse dans sa première parodie, ce qui nous invite à la relecture du texte." Henri Justin, *Avec Poe jusqu'au bout de la prose* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2009) 198.

Cornelius and Poe's "Rue Morgue." The two stories were published about ten years apart in the mid-1800s and both deal with crimes committed by "innocent" entities. Balzac's story, a traditional novel containing elements of detective fiction, tells of thefts committed by a sleepwalker; whereas Poe's, a detective story with elements of traditional narration, tells of two murders by an orangutan. Eisenzweig terms these non-guilty criminals "non-identities."

In Eisenzweig's view, the orangutan who kills Mme. L'Esplanaye and her daughter can no more commit murder, or any crime for that matter, than it can feel guilt because it is outside the bounds of human society. "An orangutan can kill," he writes, "but it can never break a law." As far as the history of the incident is concerned, two horrific deaths did occur, but there was no crime and therefore no murderer because the entity that caused the deaths is in fact a non-identity. Therefore, the first story of the detective fiction genre includes neither crime nor criminal. Rather, it simply recounts "the solution to the enigma of a crime apparently committed in a locked room."[637]

Before arriving at the solution to the enigma, Dupin goes through a process of deduction that negatively defines the murderer as not having normal human traits and not belonging to the realm of cultural identity. Eisenzweig reminds us that in "Rue Morgue" the distance between the shutter and the lightning-rod was such that it would prevent any person of normal constitution entrance to the apartment. The criminal is thus negatively defined as something not of normal size, shape, weight, strength, etc. In addition, through the discussion of the murderer's language "the monkey's cries are progressively *excluded* from the universe of cultural identity without being positively attached to the domain of the natural." The

[637] My translation: "Un orang-outang peut tuer, jamais il n'enfreindra une loi. […] ce coupable innocent constitue la solution de l'énigme posée par un méfait apparemment commis dans une chambre close." Eisenzweig 279.

orangutan is, "above all, determined as a *negation*, being presented as non-human rather than as simply and positively animal."[638]

Eisenzweig insists on the fact that the non-identity in Poe's story, the being that is neither guilty nor innocent, is an orangutan: "A monkey, that is to say, in the nineteenth century, the shadow lurking behind human identity, its negation and its origin at the same time."[639] The origin of the species being now largely accepted, what is the shadow currently lurking behind contemporary identity? For Oates, the shadow has to do with the depths of the psyche. This discussion of non-identity and shadows lurking in the background of identity recalls the earlier discussion, in Part II, of the fragmented, dispersed nature of Oates's characters in general and the specific shadow-figure imagery of *The Tattooed Girl*. As I discussed in Part II, Oates's characters represent another sort of non-identity. Her fragmented, dispersed depiction of them emphasizes the palimpsestic quality of their personalities. Each character does not represent one whole unified identity, rather they are a hybrid composition of not necessarily harmonious selves.

One of the problems inherent in detective fiction, according to Eisenzweig, is that "if there is mystery, it cannot be 'solved'; if it is solved, it means that it didn't really exist."[640] (282) "Rue Morgue," and, indeed, all detective fiction, is founded on a paradox inherent in a situation in which "a single narrative both puts forward and solves a mystery, a single text reveals what it is supposed to hide," writes Eisenzweig.[641] This paradox is centered around the opposition presence/absence. In a locked-room mystery, an open window indicates the

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[638] My translation of: "les cris du singe sont progressivement *exclus* de l'univers culturel de l'identité sans pour être autant positivement rattachés au domaine du naturel"; "il est également, et surtout, déterminé comme une *négation*, étant présenté comme non humain plutôt que comme simplement et positivement animal." Eisenzweig 284.

[639] My translation of: "Un singe, c'est-à-dire, au XIXe siècle, cette ombre qui se profile derrière l'identité humaine, à la fois négation et origine de celle-ci." Eisenzweig 284.

[640] My translation of: "Question insoluble, en vérité: s'il y a mystère, il ne peut être 'éclairci'; s'il est élucidé, c'est qu'il n'existait pas vraiment." Eisenzweig 282.

[641] My translation of: "le récit policier, qui veut qu'une fenêtre soit à la fois ouverte et fermée, c'est-à-dire qu'une seule narration propose, puis résolve une énigme – qu'un seul et même texte dévoile ce qu'il est censé cacher." Eisenzweig 283.

presence of an assassin in the room at the time of the crime, whereas a closed one excludes his existence. In Poe, however, the window was not closed, but inaccessible: "In other words, the murderer does exist, was there in the room, but in negative form, as the presence of an absence rather than the absence of a presence."[642] Through the arbitrary shift from deduction to physical discovery, we understand that "*comprehension is narrative*, the identity of the criminal's identity is a textual matter. Therefore, the text must be as problematic as the identity it defines."[643] The arbitrary nature of the text becomes evident. Indeed, "Rue Morgue" could just as easily have ended at the hypothesis of madness.

What is notably missing from Poe's text and from the crime is motive. The helpless victims had no enemies and their money was not taken. Eisenzweig reasons that as "no reasonable motive enters into the assassin's act" and, "therefore, nothing prepares or *precedes* this act" committed by a non-identity, then the murders in the Rue Morgue were not, in fact, murders, but rather accidents.[644] The death of the two women is "present as a sudden event, contigent and arbitrary, it disappears as a crime or even as a simple intentional act."[645] The assassin's exclusion from the human domain directly corresponds to the exclusion of the crime from the narrative field.

A similar problematic related to identity and crime can be found at work in Oates's novels. Her culprits are people, but their grotesque traits can be read as excluding them from the realm of cultural identity. Bethie and Teena, in *Rape: A Love Story*, are reduced to the helpless state of the legless mermaid they argue about immediately preceding their attack; their rapists behave like a pack of dogs. *Beasts* emphasizes the animality lurking in the depths

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[642] My translation of: "En d'autres termes, le meurtrier existera, aura été là, dans la chambre, mais sous une forme négative, présence d'une absence plutôt qu'absence de présence." Eisenzweig 284.
[643] My translation of: "Autrement dit, en quelque sorte, *la compréhension est narrative*, l'identité du criminel relève d'un récit. Aussi bien, ce récit doit être aussi problématique que l'identité qu'il institue." Eisenzweig 285.
[644] My translation of: "nul motif raisonnable (c'est-à-dire nulle motivation raisonnée) n'entre dans l'acte de l'assassin. Que rien ne prépare, donc, ne *précède* (du moins *du point de vue du meurtrier*) cet acte." Eisenzweig 285.
[645] My translation of: "présente comme fait soudain, contingent et arbitraire, elle disparaît en tant que crime ou même comme simple acte intentionnel." Eisenzweig 286.

of the personality. The tattooed girl is set apart by the permanent web-like marks on her skin. Finally, the characters in *The Falls* have been so traumatized by the past that they inhabit the present as mere ghosts. Thus, the parodic supernatural solution hinted at in *Mysteries of Winterthurn* is paralleled in the more realistic environments of the corpus texts by the emphasis on the characters as entities at the margins. Might they not, then, like Poe's orangutan, be read as "innocent" entities whose actions are not to be judged by society's standards of right and wrong? Certainly the post-humanist vision of Oates's texts takes the problem outside the limits of the factual world to a place where what is experienced can only be understood through the emotional realm, the real, yet elusive, center of identity. In this way, these texts, as we have seen, put forward a mystery, but do not solve it; the mystery of personality and interaction is retained to the very end.

In contrast to the rigid confines of genre rules, one might say that Oates's "detective" fiction returns to a literary project more true to Poe's conception of the genre in her understanding of the genre as "plastic." "It is due to the fact," explains Justin, "that Poe's detective formula is not cut off from the substratum of the imaginary wherein lies the paradox of all his fiction that it can lead the inaugural story to the humoristic ending of a guilty party that is sent to the zoo (in other words, the garden of innocents) [...]. Poe does not fall into the rut of genre."[646] Justin might say that though Oates rewrites certain elements of formula, her fiction remains true to the modular nature of the "genre" as invented by Poe; in this sense, detective fiction that does not conform is actually the truest type.[647]

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[646] My translation of: "C'est parce que la formule policière ne se coupe pas, chez Poe, d'un substrat imaginaire où se joue le paradoxe de toute sa fiction qu'elle peut conduire le conte inaugural jusqu'au dénouement humoristique d'un coupable envoyé au Jardin des plantes (autant dire, au jardin des innocents), [..]. Poe ne tombe pas dans l'ornière d'un genre." Justin 215-216.

[647] The fact that Oates is an experimental writer of hybrid fiction has been foregrounded once again in 2010 with the publication of two new stories in collections conceived to challenge the limits of genre classification. "The Story of the Stabbing" appears in *The Dark End of the Street: New Stories of Sex and Crime by Today's Top Authors*, Eds. Jonathan Santlofer and S. J. Rozan (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010) 204-223. In her introduction to the volume, Rozan explains that it contains work by "writers from both banks of the stream dividing crime writing and literary writing" and emphasizes the permeability of genre boundaries (1-2). The story "Fossil-Figures" is published in the volume *Stories: All-New Tales*, eds. Neil Gaiman and Al Sarrantonio (New York:

3.11.4. An Inherently Malleable Genre

The mutability of the form seems to be the general connecting thread between the various theories of the detective fiction genre that have been discussed here. From Todorov to Symons, Palmer and Tadié, the general malleability of the form is emphasized. Taking this concept even further, there seems to be a current tendency in the study of detective fiction to emphasize the open-endedness and fluidity of the genre from its very origins, as illustrated by Justin's analysis of "The Murders In The Rue Morgue" as at once the embodiment of a newly created genre and a parody of that genre. Other recent, within the last decade or so, critical volumes take new looks at an old form, revisiting old models to show that they are not necessarily as cut and dried as we sometimes tend to believe.

The aim of *Crime Fictions: Subverted Codes and New Structures*, explain editors François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery in their preface, "is to focus on the evolution of a specific genre, crime fiction, on the blurring of its contours and on the subversion of its codes in English and American novels and films." The articles in the first section of their collection explore "some of the first shifts of the genre, in novels by Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, or Agatha Christie. In these texts, the frontiers between genres are porous, and the integration of one genre within another can sometimes open onto contradictory readings and interpretations." The following section moves on to look at "the new structures and subverted codes of contemporary crime fictions" which "foreground the heuristic quest which is at work in the text but frustrate the reader's expectation by denying him/her any final resolution or solving of enigmas, enhancing on the contrary the elusiveness of truth."[648] They thus establish

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HarperCollins Publishers, 2010) 15-28. In his introduction to the volume, "Just Four Words," Gaiman explains that it was compiled with the desire to emphasize story over genre: "Al Sarrantonio and I were discussing anthologies of short stories. He had edited a huge anthology of cutting-edge horror, and another of cutting-edge fantasy, each book, in its way, definitive. And in talking, we realised that we had something in common: that all we cared about, really, were the stories. What we missed, what we wanted to read, were stories that made us care, stories that forced us to turn the page" (1).

[648] François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery, Preface, *Crime Fictions: Subverted Codes and New Structures*, eds. François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery (Paris: PUPS, 2004) 7.

malleability as an inherent characteristic of a genre which is described as both being created and engaging in shifts at the same time. Indeed, like Justin in his re-reading of Poe's classic text, the contributors to this volume emphasize the subversive elements of some of the classic examples of the genre.

Christophe Gelly, in his reading of the classic Sherlock Holmes novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, writes that this work "contributed as much to the evolution of the genre as to the establishment of it."[649] Interestingly, the aspects that Gelly finds discordant in Conan Doyle's text are very similar to those aspects of Oates's texts that prompted my reading of her work as parody, notably an enigmatic narrative structure, an atmosphere of fantasy that pervades the novel, and the text's open-endedness. In this Holmes story, Gelly reminds us, Watson is not simply a narrator companion recounting the case after the fact. Throughout much of the narrative he takes on a more active role, having been lead by his friend to believe that he must be the principal investigator this time. It is precisely the ambiguity of his role which makes him the perfect narrator of a detective story: "due to his limited understanding of the story he creates the suspense, thus 'hooking' the reader who is eager to know what is hiding behind the story that is being told."[650] Similarly in Oates I have also shown how suspense is created through the characters' limited understanding. Oates's semi-omniscient multiple viewpoint technique preserves the limited comprehension of the Watson-type classic narrator; the characters' inherent difficulties in understanding the world around them create the suspense that generates continued reader interest. Secondly, Gelly comments on an atmosphere of fantasy pervading the text which is directly connected to "the fear of the loss of

[649] My translation of: "*The Hound of the Baskervilles* contribue à l'évolution autant qu'à l'implantation du genre lui-même." Christophe Gelly, "*The Hound of the Baskervilles*: Histoire, fantasme et genèse de la narration policière," *Crime Fictions: Subverted Codes and New Structures*, eds. François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery (Paris: PUPS, 2004) 12.
[650] My translation of: "par sa compréhension limitée de l'histoire il ménage le suspense et ainsi 'accroche' le lecteur désireux de savoir ce qui se trame derrière le récit qui lui est fait." Gelly 14-15.

self as the organizing phantasm of the narrative."[651] As we have seen, this same fundamental fear of the self faced with an enigmatic hostile world is also a ruling paradigm of Oates's texts where it is foregrounded and thus given all the more importance. Finally, Gelly points out the open-endedness of the text which both introduces other Holmes investigations which are never narrated in detail and leaves certain elements of its own plot undeveloped, such as the enigma of Stapleton's mistress. Indeed, the fact that parts of the mysteries remain unsolved was one of my main arguments for reading Oates's texts as parody of detective fiction.

What can be made of such observations that create a closed loop, bending Oates's end of the string around to show the similarities between her fictional hybrids and those at the origins of the genre? Does Joyce Carol Oates rewrite detective fiction at all? Or does she simply write about crime in the open-ended malleable way of the genre's beginnings, the way great, innovative works of the genre have always done? To get a perspective on the role of Oates's fiction it might be useful to briefly imagine a comparison with the intensely popular formulaic crime novels of John Grisham, for example. Such an exercise is useful for its efficient demonstration of the inherent differences of these two authors' crime-oriented texts. To use Margaret Atwood's terminology, whereas Oates's stories hold a mirror up to reality in an attempt to capture certain ephemeral aspects of a complex truth, Grisham's novels play to a "Disneyland of the soul."[652]

Each line of my inquiry into Oates's *The Falls, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* therefore inevitably leads back to and gets hung up on the problem of the works' metaphysical preoccupations and open-endedness. These characteristics cannot be overlooked in relation to these four works, however, they are the ones that seem to prevent the understanding of the texts as detective fiction. Yet even this, it turns out, is not necessarily problematic. Within the inherently malleable realm of detective fiction another sub-type exists

[651] My translation of: "cette peur de la perte de soi comme fantasme ordonnateur du récit." Gelly 16.
[652] Margaret Atwood, cited by Christine Evain, "John Grisham's megabestsellers," *Crime Fictions: Subverted Codes and New Structures*, eds. François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery (Paris: PUPS, 2004) 119.

to account for metaphysically preoccupied works; Merivale and Sweeney, in the introduction to their volume *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Post-modernism*, call it the "metaphysical detective story." "A metaphysical detective story," they explain, "is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot."[653] This definition seems to precisely fit the observations that have been made about Oates's texts. Might the solution to the whole Oates riddle described in this study simply be that her texts are metaphysical detective stories? Indeed, Merivale and Sweeney include Joyce Carol Oates on their list of authors of metaphysical detective fiction.[654] The idea of having at last discovered an appropriate label to attribute to Oates's stories, therefore giving the impression that the case has been solved, is immensely attractive. However, a closer look at the theory of metaphysical detective stories reveals, once again, a discrepancy between the sub-type and Oates's fiction.

Merivale and Sweeney identify six characteristic themes of the metaphysical detective story which they summarize as:

> (1) the defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise en abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence; (5) the missing person, the "man of the crowd," the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation.[655]

Whereas a certain proximity is discernible between these themes and those observed in Oates's texts, it is with the end result, the overall effect of the works, that the difference becomes apparent. The act of detecting is problematic in Oates's works and her complex structures do highlight the complex interconnectivity of experience and the simultaneous

[653] Merivale and Sweeney 2.
[654] Merivale and Sweeney 5.
[655] Merivale and Sweeney 8.

existence of multiple types of understanding. Likewise, her characters are often not able to make satisfactory sense of the evidence they accumulate. Nevertheless, Oates's fiction does not share the metaphysical detective story's "most striking aspect" which is quite possibly, according to Merivale and Sweeney, "the inherently unresolvable nature of its own self-reflexiveness."[656] Oates's technique in the works studied here is not blatantly postmodern, in the sense of metatextual fiction raising barriers between the reader and the represented universe. The play of language is not an end in itself in these works. In addition, the acts of detecting in Oates's works, while they fail to completely solve the mysteries, are not failures, per se, they are simply incomplete. Thus, *Mysteries of Winterthurn* can be considered metaphysical detective fiction,[657] but the works in this study lack its properly self-reflexive dimension.

Whereas the project of metaphysical detective fiction seems to be to explore the notion that there is no inherent meaning outside of that which we attempt to create through our texts, Oates's literary project has a different focus. Rather than focusing on the artificial constructions of our reality, she focuses on the nature of this reality, showing that there is no inherent meaning in the individual, but only in the interconnectivity that is created through relationships. This has led some critics to analyze Oates's writing as social criticism. Cologne-Brookes, for example, views Oates as a pragmatist with a melioristic vision. As such, she writes out of a belief in the possibilities of social change, "stressing the importance of individual behavior as the only way to facilitate improvements in collective behavior."[658] Brenda Daly, for her part, highlights the interconnectivity that is foregrounded in Oates's works. In "The Art of Democracy: Photography in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates/Rosamund Smith," she discusses the ways in which Oates challenges the conventions

[656] Merivale and Sweeney 10.
[657] Merivale and Sweeney write: "Joyce Carol Oates's series of Gothic mysteries, set in nineteenth-century America, which defy ratiocinative solutions – especially *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984) – deserves further investigation, for example" (20).
[658] Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes* 5.

of the thriller in two earlier works, *The Barrens* and *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart*. Both novels challenge the myth of the isolated self, emphasizing interconnectivity in its place. Thus, Oates's "aesthetic techniques are certainly playful," writes Daly, "but they are also political. In an era of increasing privatization, and its heightened emphasis on the autonomous individual and on family 'values,' collective caretaking is being undermined even as the gap between rich and poor widens."[659] Indeed, it is this aspect that Daly considers to be the unifying thread tying all of Oates's work together in a coherent whole:

> For more than forty years, Oates's fiction has conveyed her democratic vision along with her belief that we must acknowledge our interdependencies, not only as romantic couples or as families but also as members of society and, more broadly, creatures of the earth. To convey this conviction, Oates does not simply allude to the visual or verbal arts; she transposes them. For example, in *The Barrens* and *Because It Is Bitter*, she challenges the conventions of the novel, particularly the thriller, as well as the codes of photography and painting to urge readers to resist a narrow focus on individuals or families. Through the creative use of photographic techniques in *The Barrens* and *Because It Is Bitter*, Oates/Smith also asks readers to think more imaginatively and sympathetically about the tragic effects of undemocratic hierarchies.[660]

Thus, for Daly, the final message of Oates's fiction is to remind us that "if we wish to create a more humane and just society, we need to sympathize with others despite the chasms that divide us. Moving beyond sympathy to action, we must analyze and transform aesthetic and socioeconomic hierarchies that not only divide us but also threaten the survival of our democracy."[661]

At the close of *The Falls*, Royall awakens to the "mysterious livingness" of all things. In *Beasts*, an object in Paris connects Gillian to her past in Massachusetts. A similar process is involved with Bethie's sighting of the police officer in *Rape: A Love Story*. Complex relationships are woven in *The Tattooed Girl* which lead slowly down the path to understanding. Certainly the human potential for connections is emphasized in each of these works. Oates's fiction may indeed, as Daly suggests, encourage us to imagine a more socially

[659] Daly, "The Art of Democracy" 459.
[660] Daly, "The Art of Democracy" 474.
[661] Daly, "The Art of Democracy" 475.

responsible and democratic future for our society. However, through its multiplication of nonsensical instances of violence, struggling characters and focus on individual forms of justice, it also reminds us just how far away we are from the democratic socially responsible caretaking ideal that Daly holds up. In the meantime, to quote Raymond Chandler, Oates's fiction involves "an effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes, and the gradual elucidation of character, which is all the detective story has any right to be about anyway."[662]

This discussion of elements of detective fiction in Joyce Carol Oates's work should have made apparent that detective fiction itself is not the end, it is only one aspect of Oates's fiction, a means to an as-yet unidentified end, a framework to set up more comprehensive introspection. Writing about Samuel Dashiell Hammett, Symons comments that "a crime writer with sufficient skill and tact can use violent events to comment by indirection on life, art, society, and at the same time compose a novel admirable in the carpentry of its structure and delicately intelligent in its suggestions of truth about human relationships" (JS 148). Similarly, in Oates the treatment of violence and crime is a means rather than an end.

In Chapter 2, "The Ontological Basis of Form," of *The Form of Victorian Fiction*, Hillis Miller discusses the notion that novelistic form mirrors the metaphysical situation of society. He analyzes the form of "earlier English fiction" and Victorian fiction in relation to the ontological concern of society's conception of a higher being, concluding that society's ontological status and the temporal structure of its fiction exist in direct correlation. According to Hillis Miller, the form of Victorian novels is directly related to the ontological transformation that had taken place in Victorian society, notably the general understanding of "the death of God."[663] The consequence of this new system of thought can be seen in the fiction of this era in terms of man's relationship to the other. Worth is no longer bestowed

[662] Chandler 17.
[663] J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 30-31.

upon the individual by the fact that he was created by God so he is forced to construct his own worth in relation to those around him.[664] As Victorian fiction develops, Hillis Miller claims, this translates itself into "an increasing focus on intersubjective relations to the exclusion of man's relation to physical nature or to any supernatural power, and there is an increasing tendency to define man in terms of the strength and quality of his volition." This analysis leads to the observation that "the form taken by Victorian fiction implies a new notion of structure, and this new structure derives from the new metaphysical situation."[665]

Drawing a parallel between Hillis Miller's analysis of form and meaning in Victorian fiction and my reading of Oates's fiction, allows me to conclude that the recourse to certain structures and themes of detective fiction, together with the open ending unusual to this type of fiction, foregrounds an ontological situation of profound mystery which implies that a certain frustrated quest motif might be inherent in modern society; we are constantly seeking answers but are not always able to come by satisfactory ones. Indeed, this study has shown the extent to which uncertainty is omni-present in Oates's fiction. No clear interpretation is possible. Even after four hundred pages of analysis, it is still impossible to decide completely, for example, whether or not justice is served by Dromoor's vigilante actions, the degree of innocence which should be attributed to Gillian and her precise role in the campus fires, the extent to which the Burnaby children exchange information about their father's past, and whether or not one of the characters in *The Tattooed Girl* can be read as a competitive hero.

Working down through the various textual levels from the themes to the text itself and finally to the structure, I have shown that mystery pervades every level. One might say it is the overall structuring concept of these works. Such a fictional world is situated in the gray borderline area between absolutes, the place in which humanity evolves though it does not always recognize this fact. "Detective fiction" in Oates's rewriting is rendered powerless to

[664] Hillis Miller, *Victorian Fiction* 32-33.
[665] Hillis Miller, *Victorian Fiction* 33.

restore a status-quo (classic detective fiction) or uphold an absolute moral standard (hard-boiled thriller hero). Rather, its various elements are put to use in the rendering of an inherently flawed humanity as the finality of a detective fiction plot is dissolved into an atmosphere of all-pervasive mystery, confusing emotions and conflicting responses. In this way, Oates rewrites detective fiction, making it correspond to her enigmatic vision of the world, giving it a more human dimension that perhaps speaks more fully to contemporary readers.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion:
An Empire of Enigma

> The ideal criticism […] aspires to the art of "disinterested" conversation [...], a conversation between equals, systematic, unhurried, "profane," reflective. It must take the artist's freedom seriously – it must resist its own conservative and reductive instincts. If only cricitism speaks, and all the arts are silent, it is necessary that it speaks with both sympathy and rigor; it cannot take its reflective responsibilities lightly.
>
> - Joyce Carol Oates (*PA* 5)

In her 1972 essay "Whose Side Are You On?," Oates discusses the following two statements about literature:

> The book I make is a subjective and specific affair. I have no purpose at all when composing the stuff except to compose it. I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. (Nabokov, 1968)
>
> Pure literature means little compared to the death by hunger of innumerable children. (Sartre, 1964)

Oates concludes this short but scathing article criticizing Nabokov, Sartre, Beckett and Borges for what she sees as their solipsism with the following statement: "If we must choose between Nabokov's statement and Sartre's, we will choose Sartre's probably. But we should not be forced to make this choice. We must reject only the 'pure' literature, the antiseptic 'purity' of the literature he scorns, and commit ourselves to literature itself, which doesn't simply belong to any era but which helps create it."[666] This viewpoint – concentrating on the practical functions of literature – seems to confirm Cologne-Brookes's view of Oates's pragmatism. She criticizes the idea of literature for its own sake, preferring to consider literature as a

[666] Joyce Carol Oates, "Whose Side Are You On?" *The New York Times* (4 June 1972): 63.

crucial element of the world and lived experience. Literature equals creation, creation of meaning and understanding.

In a 1994 interview with Cologne-Brookes, Oates responded to the query of whether or not "novelists are the ultimate power-wielders" in the following way: "The more gifted artist, perhaps, is one who doesn't require rigid control, but is open to promptings from the unconscious. To call a novelist a 'power-wielder' is to underestimate the novelist's dependence upon the ungovernable."[667] She feels that she has gradually become more in tune with this "ungovernable" aspect of life: "I think that my 'vision' has evolved over the years, and has become, if anything, more complex, ambiguous; less thematic. The ideal work of art might be one with no 'vision' or obtrusive 'theme' at all, simply a graceful, or even a gritty, delineation of an experience so powerful it seems to us in retrospect not an artificial experience, at all, but something quite real." This has an effect on the way she conceives of her plots: "I don't think of 'hanging' my ideas onto a plot, but rather of discovering the seemingly inevitable plot that is generated by a certain set of characters in relationship to one another; 'ideas' arise out of this story as they do in life, but can't be imposed upon it. At least, that is my vision of my own writing."[668]

It is interesting that Oates's fictional project, which considers literature to be both a realm for the exploration of unconscious impulses and a crucial element of lived experience, has led her to focus almost exclusively in recent years on novels that deal with the aftereffects of violent crime. Oates has specifically stated that she does not write detective fiction, rather, she is a writer of what she calls "mystery and suspense" fiction. At a public appearance and book signing in 2009, Oates explained: "The genre I like is psychological mystery/suspense which I think is very true to life." In her view, the line of demarcation between genre fiction and literary fiction concerns the resolution of enigma. In genre fiction, the mystery is always

[667] Gavin Cologne-Brookes, "Written Interviews and a Conversation with Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006) 549.
[668] Cologne-Brookes, "Written Interviews," 551.

explained. Literary fiction, however, belongs to a different dimension; each literary work is supposed to be unique, so things do not need to be resolved.[669] Oates's explanation may be a bit reductionist. However, this study has certainly shown that *The Falls, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* are not genre works. My goal was to investigate the strong resemblance to detective fiction in works that are not considered to belong to the genre in the hopes of better understanding their effects. Whether one chooses to view these works as detective fiction in the broad sense depends on one's definition of the term, however, there can be no doubt that these novels evoke certain conventions of the genre in dealing with stories of crime and detection and it is in this respect that they can be read as hybrid rewritings. Ultimately, it is the act of detecting that is the most important element of these works as Oates is interested in ways of "pursuing mysterious threads toward illumination and knowledge."[670] It is the heuristic quest that is foregrounded rather than the final resolution of inherently unresolvable puzzles of life. In this way Oates takes detective fiction and, like a kidnapper holding a hostage, forces it to reveal its limits by imposing on it that open-endedness that is characteristic of life due to the limited and multiple viewpoints that define our experience of the world. Indeed, these four novels are triply "open," to use Umberto Eco's terminology. They expose, but offer no answers to the mysteries of life, they use textual strategies full of gaps in an attempt to recreate unconscious processes, and they introduce crime plots that are not fully resolved.[671] As in Bayard's reading of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the answers to the mysteries must be situated in the blanks between the words and punctuation of the texts.[672] However, unlike in Christie's work, in Oates's novels no amount of close reading reveals a satisfactory resolution of the enigmas.

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[669] Joyce Carol Oates, Interview and Book Signing, Virgin Megastore, Champs Elysées, Paris (4 July 2009).
[670] Oates, Interview and Book Signing, Paris.
[671] Umberto Eco, *L'oeuvre ouverte*, Trans. Chantal Roux de Bézieux and André Boucourechliev (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).
[672] Bayard 56.

Thus, these texts make the inherently enigmatic nature of life apparent to the reader. However, this is an awareness that does not necessarily come to the characters themselves. Though Oates's characters ask all sorts of questions pertaining to their relationships with the outside world, what they do not do much is question the validity of their own actions. This observation allows us to realize just how inherently normal Oates's characters are. As the social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson explain:

> We believe our own judgments are less biased and more independent than those of others partly because we rely on introspection to tell us what we are thinking and feeling, but we have no way of knowing what others are really thinking. And when we introspect, looking into our souls and hearts, the need to avoid dissonance assures us that we have only the best and most honorable of motives.[673]

Certainly, Bethie, Dromoor, Gillian, Alma, Jet and Royall never question the morality behind their potentially lethal actions though the reader can discern flaws in their arguments. It is clear that Oates concocts a fictional world whose mystery parallels that of our world, a realm which the confused, questing subject can appropriately call home, a realm which resituates the dispersed, dislocated subject in terms of his humanity, which means, in Oates's aesthetics, a permanent state of isolation and confusion that can only be assuaged through acceptance and the creation of relationships. In the words of Edmund White,

> Joyce Carol Oates has a Balzacian sweep to her work – a vast range of sympathy and understanding. But she isn't analytic like Balzac; rather she can be as dark and Gothic as Faulkner, and like him, she can place us into a process we don't quite understand at first glimpse. But she mostly has an originality of vision and style that makes her inimitable. She can be shockingly sensual in her writing but always in the service of the humanity of her characters.[674]

The questions explored in this dissertation were brought up by the close reading of the corpus works, however, they also have value as examples. Since 2004, Oates has continued to publish stories about crime, its effects and the act of detecting. *Missing Mom* (2005) follows

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[673] Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)* (London: Pinter & Martin Ltd., 2008) 43.
[674] Edmund V. White, "Joyce Carol Oates: Writer, Colleague, Friend," *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (Winter 2006): 396.

the protagonist, Nikki, through the year following her mother's brutal, senseless murder, recounting the investigation into the crime as well as Nikki's struggle to cope with her loss. The narrator of *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006) opens the text with the explanation that it will be "an inquiry into the death of my college roommate Minette Swift who died fifteen years ago this week: on the eve of her nineteenth birthday which was April 11, 1975."[675] She admits to knowing more about the case than the authorities and emphasizes the shifting semantic notions of "truth" and "justice." The life of Rebecca, the protagonist of *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007), is profoundly affected by her father's murder-suicide rampage that left her orphaned at the age of thirteen. She makes her way through life with danger lurking around every corner, taking the form of abusive husbands and serial killer stalkers, among other things. *My Sister, My Love* (2008) takes its inspiration from a real-life murder mystery; this fictional account of the Rampike family is based on the murder of JonBenet Ramsey, a befuddling true crime locked-room case. The first-person narrator tries to make sense of his sister's unsolved murder. To conclude, brief readings of Oates's two most recent novels will show that the points discussed in this study are also relevant to the fiction Oates is publishing today.

A Fair Maiden

Joyce Carol Oates's 2010 novella *A Fair Maiden* is an Otto Penzler Book like the two novellas studied at length in this dissertation, *Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story*.[676] In this way, the publication of *A Fair Maiden* seems to create a sort of early twenty-first century novella trilogy. Like *Beasts*, the story is told through the point of view of one unique focalizer, sixteen-year-old Katya Spivak, and portrays an "improper" relationship between a vulnerable

[675] Joyce Carol Oates, *Black Girl/White Girl* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006) 1.
[676] Otto Penzler is the founder of The Mysterious Bookshop in New York City. He is known for his work in publishing detective fiction. Otto Penzler Books publishes mystery books and is currently an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

young woman and an older male artistic authority figure. However, Katya's story is told by a third person semi-omniscient narrator. Like *Rape: A Love Story*, it evokes the evolution of an improbable relationship and the profound feelings that accompany it.

"Innocently it began," the story opens, "it" being the relationship between sixteen-year-old Katya Spivak from economically depressed Vineland, New Jersey and sixty-eight-year-old Marcus Kidder, long time wealthy patron and summer resident of upper class Bayhead Harbor, New Jersey where Katya is working as a nanny for the summer. Katya's reaction to Mr. Kidder's first words to her pose the attraction/revulsion problematic that will characterize her choices throughout the text:

> On Ocean Avenue of Bayhead Harbor, New Jersey [...] she'd been pushing the Engelhardts' ten-month-old baby in his stroller [...] when, as she paused to gaze into the Prim Rose Lane window, there came an unexpected voice in her ear: "And what would you choose, if you had your wish?"
>
> What registered was the quaint usage *your wish. Your wish*, like something in a fairy tale.
>
> At sixteen she was too old to believe in fairy tales, but she did believe in what might be promised by a genial male voice urging *your wish*.[677]

The first response indicates Katya's desire to believe that sheer good fortune could fall on her as on a princess in a fairy tale. The second indicates her practicality as a worldly cynical young woman from an economically depressed background who has learned that women have ways of getting things from men.

The young heroine is at a transitional stage. Sexually knowledgeable, no longer innocent about the dynamics of male/female relations, she is nevertheless very childlike in her longing to be loved by her parents and other adults in positions of authority. This duality is already embodied in Katya's response to Mr. Kidder's question about what she would choose from the lingerie store's display window:

> Katya had been staring at a red lace camisole and matching red lace panties – silk, sexy, ridiculously expensive – worn by an elegantly thin blond mannequin with a bland beautiful face, but it was a white muslin Victorian-style

[677] Joyce Carol Oates, *A Fair Maiden*, Advance Reading Copy (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009) 3. Hereafter abbreviated as *FM*.

> nightgown with satin trim, on a girl mannequin with braids, to which she pointed. (*FM* 4)

How to interpret Marcus Kidder's behavior towards Katya is as much an enigma to Katya as it is to the reader who, supplied with information through the prism of Katya's conscious, nevertheless imagines himself more knowledgeable than this poor young heroine and often cringes at her choices. Is Kidder, as his name might indicate, simply harmless and playful? Or, is an older man's interest in a young woman never innocent, as Katya herself suspects: "Flattered by his interest in her, though she guessed she knew what it was, or might be; yet somehow she didn't think that was it" (*FM* 6). Katya's inability to attribute a moral value to Mr. Kidder's actions runs throughout the whole text, her appreciation of him swinging regularly back and forth like a pendulum between thinking of him as a friend who wants only good things for her, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a dirty old pervert who seeks to abuse her for his own ends. The enigma of the text becomes deciding whether or not it is in fact a fairy tale or a perverse tale of sexual exploitation.

Katya displays characteristics of a typical Oates heroine insofar as she is an emotional being who cannot always attribute meaning to her actions and responses. She confesses to having certain "bad habits" but does not know why: "Why she sometimes spoke as she did, Katya didn't know. *The mouth speaks what the ear is to hear*" (*FM* 6). As her first encounter with Mr. Kidder continues, "their conversation, which appeared to be so wayward, casual, haphazard and spontaneous, like the children's cries as they tossed bread to the waterfowl, was more accurately following a deeper, more deliberate route, like an underground stream that, from the surface of the ground, you can't detect" (*FM* 9). Indeed, this might be an apt metaphor for their relationship as a whole. Does Katya actually choose her relationship with Marcus Kidder? Or does she simply respond in the only way a young woman of her social background can in such a situation? Indeed, the story unwinds in a series of repetitive ever-widening circular patterns; Katya decides one thing, but then relatively quickly does the exact

opposite. The first chapter closes with Katya accepting Mr. Kidder's card and responding noncommittally to his offer to bring the children to his house for tea while "coolly thinking, *I don't think so*" (*FM* 10). However, the final words of the chapter indicate that she does, indeed, see Mr. Kidder again, and that the two eventually become quite intimate: "*My darling, I thought then that I had lost you. Before I even knew you*" (*FM* 11). In the very next chapter, Katya does, in fact, bring the Engelhardt children to tea at Mr. Kidder's stately residence.

Unable to decide the quality of Mr. Kidder's intentions, Katya decides to take a gamble and leave her future up to chance. "Let the dice decide," her father had been fond of saying. Thus, Katya, when faced with a new and unknown problem, falls back on her upbringing, on an old piece of family wisdom: "*Let the dice decide* was a cool way of saying *Take a chance, see what happens, why the hell not?* / Not a good idea, maybe! But Katya was going to execute it." Katya naively thinks that she can be the one to exploit Mr. Kidder, thinking "in Atlantic City, such [elderly, rich, lonely] men were *marks*. Such men were asking to be *exploited, duped*" (*FM* 12). Unfortunately, the situation keeps getting away from her; a pattern that repeats itself throughout the novella. On her second visit to his house, this time alone, Mr. Kidder reveals that he has a mission for Katya, "a fair maiden – to be entrusted with a crucial task" (*FM* 42). However, "this mission is not now . . . will not be revealed for a while" (*FM* 43).

Katya's pattern of behavior – she decides to accept the cards as they have been displayed, but then gets angry and retreats when what she perceives to be the rules change – comes to a climax the evening that she believes Mr. Kidder drugged her and sexually abused her in her unconscious state. After this incident, faced with the feeling of utter powerlessness, Katya lashes out through violence, calling her felon cousin in to revenge what she believes to have been Mr. Kidder's sexual abuse. The truth about this incident permanently eludes us, however. It seems relatively clear that Mr. Kidder drugged her, either by putting something in

her wine, or by simply giving her wine. But whether or not he touched her sexually while she was sprawled unconscious on his sofa remains unclear. Katya has a dream-like recollection of this incident, but Mr. Kidder claims not to have done anything. Nevertheless, Marcus Kidder's motives concerning Katya are less than selfless. Even if he did nothing to her sexually against her will, he still exploited her to get what he wanted, namely a death of his choosing at the hands of a fair maiden.

In a preface to her *Mysteries of Winterthurn* Oates explains the three variations on the enigma of mystery explored in her novel:

> In "The Virgin in the Rose-Bower" the detective seeks to discover *who* has committed the murders, and *why*; in "Devil's Half-Acre" the identity of the probable murderer is less uncertain than whether, granted the prejudices of his society, he can be brought to justice. The special puzzle of "The Blood-Stained Bridal Gown" has to do with the detective's inability to solve the crime when various clues and motives will strike the attentive reader as self-evident.[678]

The special puzzle for Katya in *A Fair Maiden* is finding out just *what* Marcus Kidder wants of her and *why* and *whether or not* this can be turned to her advantage. Other mysteries evoked by the text fall under the classic Oates categories previously discussed in relation to our corpus works such as creating meaning out of a confusing relationship and fathoming the depths of the self. Once again, it feels like the narrative is leading down a path towards a violent event. One of the reasons Katya is both drawn to and befuddled by Marcus Kidder is that he is so different from any man she has ever known: "So mysterious he seemed to her, though baring his soul in a way no self-respecting man would do, in Katya's experience" (*FM* 42). She does not know what to make of him. In age, he is closest to her grandfather, but upon several occasions, Katya reflects upon the lack of things these two men have in common. Katya is fascinated by Marcus Kidder because though she feels invisible at the Engelhardts' house and "even less visible" in her own house, "here in Mr. Kidder's drawing room, Katya Spivak was wholly visible." Indeed, it seems that her very essence is changed in Mr. Kidder's

[678] Oates, "Five Prefaces: 3. *Mysteries of Winterthurn,*" 373.

presence: "In the mirror above the mantel there was a very pretty young girl with streaked-blond hair and a daring red slash of a mouth, thrilling to see" (*FM* 39). In the midst of his first vague mention of a possible mission for Katya, Mr. Kidder urgently explains:

> "There's a German term – *heimweh*, homesickness. It's a powerful sensation, like a narcotic. A yearning for home, but for something more – a past self, perhaps. A lost self. When I first saw you on the street, Katya, I felt such a sensation . . . I have no idea why." (*FM* 42)

This yearning for another self also speaks to Katya who has a troubled emotional life whether it be with her family, her boyfriends, or her employer's family. Eventually, Mr. Kidder will broach the subject of soul mates.

Ultimately, Oates's haunting tale leaves many questions unanswered. At the end of the text, Mr. Kidder is dead and Katya alive. We have been led to believe that she will inherit a vast portion of the dead man's estate. Yet the question of just how much she has been scarred by the experience, or, on the contrary, whether the unusual relationship has allowed her to evolve personally is left open. At the story's close, as Katya lays next to the unmoving Mr. Kidder, "her slender girl's fingers gripp[ing] the old man's fingers, now stiffened with cold" (*FM* 165), we wonder whether the dead man's grip will continue to hold her in an iron grasp or whether the man's final manipulation will grant her a new lease on life as an independent woman freed from her familial and economic bonds.

Considering *Beasts*, *Rape: A Love Story* and *A Fair Maiden* as a trilogy that, like the three cases in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, portrays "variations on the enigma of mystery itself" allows for a denser view of Oates's enigmatic fictional world. *Beasts* is a long and twisted hymn to the motive of a crime, exploring the complex nature of the *why* behind any event. *Rape: A Love Story* delves into the chronological aftermath of a violent crime, exploring the notion of justice. *A Fair Maiden* depicts a heroine struggling to understand what is happening to her, who lashes out violently once she feels completely powerless. In short, this is a fictional world where nothing is simple because "facts" can only be interpreted by flawed

consciences and where, though the mystery of *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *how* can often be established, that of *why* and *to what effect* remain relegated, at least to a certain degree, to the realm of the mysteries of life.

Little Bird of Heaven

Though one reviewer has criticized it as just another of Oates's "formulaic" tales of "gothic initiation,"[679] *Little Bird of Heaven* is clearly linked – thematically, stylistically and structurally – to the novels studied in this dissertation. It continues in the line of Oates's fiction of the past decade retaining the enigmatic themes, stylistic techniques and crime focus that I have shown to be so important to the four corpus works. If the resounding question of *The Falls, The Tattooed Girl, Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* is "Why?," *Little Bird of Heaven* is even more crime centered in that "Who?" is also of crucial concern to the plot. The impetus of the story is the murder of Zoe Kruller whose 14-year-old son, Aaron, finds her brutally mutilated body on a chance Sunday morning visit to his mother in February 1983. Two principal suspects are publicized by the local Sparta, New York press: Delray Kruller, Zoe's estranged husband and Aaron's father, and Eddy Diehl, a married lover of Zoe's. However, no arrests are made in the case which eventually slides into permanently unsolved oblivion. In typical Oates fashion, *Little Bird of Heaven* explores the effect of violence on the lives of those it touches most intimately. However, contrary to *Rape: A Love Story* where the culprits are pinpointed from the start, this novel's limited point of view does not allow such knowledge, thus lingering doubt about the identity of the culprit is yet another "violence" that the characters must deal with: "*No one was arrested for any crime. Yet lives were ruined*."[680] For of course, the Sparta community believes in the guilt of both suspects, doomed to eternal

[679] Churchwell, "Little Bird of Heaven and A Fair Maiden."
[680] Joyce Carol Oates, *Little Bird of Heaven* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009) 45. Hereafter abbreviated as *LBH*.

condemnation in the public's opinion. Delray Kruller is a likely suspect, but even if he is not responsible, he remains reprehensible in the community's eye as a part-Indian with violent tendencies, rumored to be a wife beater. Similarly, Eddy Diehl could have committed the murder in a fit of violent rage. Yet, if he is innocent of that, he remains an untrustworthy adulterer. Neither man is able to hold up long under the weight of so much suspicion, leaving their families behind to deal with the grief of a double loss.

Like many of Oates's novels, this one is divided into parts, each narrated from one of her distinctive limited omniscient points of view. Part One is told from the point of view of Eddy Diehl's daughter, Krista, who was eleven at the time of Zoe's murder, the identification of her father as a suspect, and the subsequent break-up of her parents' marriage, a time elliptically referred to by Krista as "the trouble" for she was too young to fully comprehend the implications of the turmoil taking place around her: "I'd been too young then to know. I was still too young at fifteen to have a grasp of what it might be, that I didn't yet know" (*LBH* 45). Yet the one thing that Krista remains utterly convinced of is that her father is innocent.

Part Two shifts to Aaron Kruller's point of view. A troubled boy with violent tendencies, Aaron is eventually expelled from high school and begins working full-time at his father's garage. Struggling with experimentation with drugs and the contrary pull of responsibility, Aaron must at the same time deal with a father who is spiralling out of control, devoting less time to managing his business and more and more time to drugs and alcohol. However, in spite of the man's faults, Aaron, like Krista, never doubts his innocence regarding his mother's murder. Because the general feeling in the community is that one of these two men must be the murderer, Krista and Aaron are each convinced that the other's father is the culprit. The two are linked by a perverse feeling of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, fascinated by what links them – similar feelings of loss of both mother and father figures – and wary of what divides them – age, sex, social milieu.

Several thematic elements link *Little Bird of Heaven* to previous Oates works. Krista's experience recalls that of the Burnaby children in *The Falls* who felt that some crucial knowledge was being deliberately kept from them: "It was a season of misery and public humiliation [...] for Ben and me, having to go to school where everyone seemed to know more about our father – our father and a woman named Zoe Kruller, who'd been 'murdered' – 'strangled in her bed' – than we did" (*LBH* 26). In addition, similarly to Juliet in *The Falls*, Krista hears her father's voice – "I knew that my father was close by because, some nights, I could feel his presence. I could hear his voice *Krista? Krissie? Where's my Puss? I'm coming to get my little Krissie-puss*" (*LBH* 24) – and her desire to be reunited with him will eventually put her in harm's way. Indeed, Oates frequently depicts children as on the other side of a wall of opacity which separates them from the realm of adulthood and understanding. The following reflection of Krista's might be made by any number of Oates characters: "The mysteries you live with, as a child. Never solved, never resolved. Utterly trivial, petty. Like a tiny pebble in your shoe, that causes you to walk crookedly" (*LBH* 71). Yet at the same time, Oates insists on the intelligence of her young protagonists who typically understand much more than they are actually told: "All these facts, I knew. Though no one had told me openly" (*LBH* 27).

Likewise, the theme of the damaging effects of public opinion recalls Teena and Bethie's experience in *Rape: A Love Story*. Krista observes:

> To claim – to claim repeatedly – that you are innocent of what it is claimed by others that you have done, or might have done, or are in some quarters *strongly suspected* of having done, is never enough unless others, numerous others, will say it for you.
>
> Unless you are publicly vindicated of whatever it is you have been *strongly suspected* of doing, it can't be enough. (*LBH* 14)

These words bring to mind the rumors evoked by Bethie in the opening pages of *Rape: A Love Story* and Teena's ordeal at the preliminary hearing which makes it clear that the commmunity intends to consider her responsible for her own aggression. They also recall the

persecution of Alma in *The Tattooed Girl* who is constantly judged by the marks on her skin, a reminder of a lurid past she can do nothing to hide. As with Teena and Alma, Oates once again points out the tendency to blame the victim: "You want to blame them, those who've been killed. Any woman *naked and strangled in her bed* you certainly want to blame" (*LBH* 46). In yet another parallel with *Rape: A Love Story*, there is a preoccupation with reasons, motive, links between events that frequently comes up empty, for, as Krista wonders about her unfortunate drug incident, "Maybe there's no *why*. [...] Why are you here but there's no *why*" (*LBH* 189).

As in *Beasts*, where doubt and mystery fester, obsession takes hold. In a passage that recalls Gillian's obsessive uncontrollable stalking of Dorcas, Krista confesses to an overwhelming urge to follow the dead woman's son: "Did I dare to follow Aaron Kruller? I did not. / Yet somehow it happened [...]" (*LBH* 165). Like Gillian, Krista believes herself unseen and is thrilled at the transgression implied by her behavior. However, once the narrative shifts to Aaron's point of view in Part Two, it becomes clear that she was mistaken. Aaron himself behaves similarly towards Krista's older brother, Ben, though with a different outcome. Describing Eddy Diehl's mental state in the final moments of his life, Oates's metaphor seems to expound on the title of the earlier novella, depicting the community as a pack of beasts: "It was like pack animals: one of their kind was injured, limping and doomed. The others detached themselves from him. He would die alone, expelled from the pack; unless the pack turned on him in a frenzy of bloodlust, tearing out his throat" (*LBH* 220).

Identity, *Little Bird of Heaven* makes clear, is not a stable entity: "This was not our daytime mother, I understood. This was Mommy-at-night in the darkened living room and with the TV set turned to *mute*" (*LBH* 75). As personality can slide between day-side and night-side extremes, so a change in vocabulary indicates an altered form of existence: "No longer *Daddy* but *your father*. This subtle change. This abrupt change. Our mother speaking

to us of *your father* as she might have been speaking of *your teacher, your bus driver*" (*LBH* 76). Memory is also a problematic thing. Krista realizes that her memories are not completely reliable. Her childhood is filled with things she does not remember (*LBH* 78), "could not comprehend" (*LBH* 80), "did not quite grasp" (*LBH* 81-82), and situations allowing for the possibility of different interpretations (*LBH* 84). Time can change our appreciation of an event, as Krista's memory of her first encounter with Jacky DeLucca attests to (*LBH* 183), or can cause us to confuse real events with imagined ones, as when Krista doubts whether she really did see Zoe Kruller one day in her mother's kitchen (*LBH* 185).

In *Little Bird of Heaven* Oates has recourse to the same stylistic characteristics examined in Part II of this study that serve as textual evocations of the liminal realm between unconscious and conscious states. Oates's characteristic use of italics can be observed in examples cited above. Punctuation (dashes and ellipses) is similarly employed as in the dialogue between Krista and her father in Part 1, Chapter 6 (*LBH* 29-47). Furthermore, wondering, asking why things happen and why one does certain things are frequent preoccupations of the characters. Indeed, Krista's unease at Zoe's ungrammatical question "What can I do you for, sweetie?" is metonymous for her whole life in a world that seems out of kilter:

> Zoe's pert question – "What can I do you for, sweetie?" – was like a riddle for there was something wrong with it, words were scrambled, you had to think – and blink – and think hard to figure out what was wrong. (*LBH* 52)

Krista Diehl and Aaron Kruller are two more in a long line of Oates protagonists whose lives are irrevocably touched by violence and who must find a way to live with a major mystery, struggling to build a life amid the remains of collapsed points of reference, a period of "trouble" which "appears inevitable" in retrospect but which seemed "just haphazard" in its present (*LBH* 97). As Krista's mother bitterly laments at one point, there is no right or wrong, "'when trouble comes to you, everyone is punished'" (*LBH* 176). In spite of this universal

dimension, however, Krista and Aaron's story is uniquely their own. Though many of the same writerly materials have gone in to the composition of this work, the work of art itself, remains distinct, its outcome far from inevitable. Indeed, the ending is unexpected and takes the veteran Oates reader by surprise.

Part Three of the novel provides an answer to the haunting questions that have been the background of Krista and Aaron's adolescent and young adult lives. A plausible scenario is provided by Jacky DeLucca's monologue to explain both who murdered Zoe Kruller and why, as well as why their fathers ended up taking the heat for the crime when there was not a shred of evidence against either of them. "The murder is solved in a bit of remarkably perfunctory plotting," complains Sarah Churchwell. Indeed, Jacky's confession does seem a bit strange in an Oates work. Tying things up almost too nicely, it might seem more appropriate in a more classic work of detective fiction where it would have been provoked by a prying detective rather than offered in penitance by a dying woman. Upon further reflection, however, this feeling of surprise at the investigation's "resolution" fades in importance as we realize, as Sarah Churchwell writes, that "Oates's true plot" is "the long-suppressed sense of entanglement" between Krista and Aaron as, struggling with the aftermaths of the violent shock to their young lives, they deal with the knowledge that their lives have been inexorably linked.[681] Upon reading Krista's confession "I couldn't risk anyone guessing that I was in love with Aaron Kruller" (*LBH* 182) one cannot help but think of Bethie's helpless feelings of love for John Dromoor in *Rape: A Love Story*, and, wondering whether Krista's attraction to Aaron represents another relationship of need similar to that of the young girl and the police officer in the novella, succumb to the temptation to think of Krista and Aaron's story as "murder: a love story." For without the one, there most certainly would not have been the other:

[681] Churchwell, "Little Bird of Heaven and A Fair Maiden."

> Rationally I know, and surely I knew then: my feeling for Aaron had only to do with Zoe Kruller, and with my father. A mysterious conjunction of these persons. Yet how could that explain the depth of my feeling, and its obsessiveness? – gripping me tight as in the coils of a massive boa constrictor. (*LBH* 184)

In an afterword to a reedition of *Expensive People* Oates writes of the political statement she saw the novel as making:

> Appearing in the fall of 1968, *Expensive People*, with its climactic episode of self-destructive violence, was perceived as an expression of the radical discontent, the despair, the bewilderment and outrage of a generation of young and idealistic Americans confronted by an America of their elders so steeped in political hypocrisy and cynisism as to seem virtually irremediable except by the most extreme means.

Such a statement of course makes one wonder at the intended political statement of Oates's more recent crime-oriented fiction. Crime is of course not a new development in society, neither are its negative aftereffects a new psychological phenomenon for contemporary culture. However, when in novel after novel Oates portrays contemporary characters whose lives are irrevocably altered due not only to an experience of physical violence but also to the "violent" assumptions of a fearful public, one cannot help but feel there is a political message in the mix. Furthermore, self-destructive violence continues to be pertinent to Oates's fiction. "What," she asks, "is assassination but a gesture of political impotence? – what are most 'crimes of passion' except gestures of self-destruction, self-annihilation?" Certainly Eddy Diehl's final "standoff" with the police in *Little Bird of Heaven* is born out of his realization of "absolute impotence; inconsequence; despair," the same sort of realization that inspired the young narrator of *Expensive People* to commit the unrevocable.[682] When the violent eruptions of her plots are read in conjunction with the borderline and spectral qualities of her characters one wonders if they might not be read as a reflection on the oppressive nature of an increasingly mediatized society.

[682] Joyce Carol Oates, "Afterword: *Expensive People*: The Confessions of a 'Minor Character,'" *Expensive People* (1968; New York: The Modern Library, 2006) 221.

The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Charles Melman uses the example of the contemporary mediatized society to illustrate his theory of "the new psychic economy" in which there has been a shift from a psychic economy of repression to one of pleasure.[683] This "new psychic economy" is characterised by the obliteration of limits and a direct use of language that makes no use of metaphor. "Today, exhibition is the rule," explains Melman, "there are no limits to the demands for transparency."[684] Technological progress not only allows us direct access to the objects of our desires but "spots and cameras act as an imperative that cannot be refused, as if one is confronted with a torturer to whom everything must be confessed, even that which one has not in fact done."[685] For Melman, the contemporary subject is no longer divided. This progress, he explains, in fact makes life easier for the subject as the removal of limits allows a more direct access to pleasure.

These characteristics of the contemporary period are identifiable in Oates's texts where cultural limits concerning violence and pleasure certainly seem to have been obliterated. Furthermore, Oates's use of language eliminates a metaphorical stage of reflection by letting the characters speak directly for themselves. When a character cannot formulate his ideas, punctuation marks are used to express the gap rather than a narrator who makes attempts at interpretation. However, Oates's stories both present a contemporary chronicle and a critique of the contemporary period. The limits to such an unbridled society, her texts illustrate, is that it brings us no closer to understanding the world and the workings of humanity. There is no self-revelation in Oates's texts, only an infinite array of experiences to be voyeuristically observed.

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[683] Charles Melman, *L'Homme sans gravité* (Paris: Denoël, 2005) 17-19.
[684] My translation of: "Il s'agit aujourd'hui d'exhiber. […] Il n'y a plus aucune limite à l'exigence de transparence." Melman 27.
[685] My translation of: "La présence des spots et des caméras agit comme un impératif devant lequel personne ne pourrait rien refuser, comme si on faisait face à un tortionnaire à qui il convient de tout avouer, y compris ce qu'on n'a pas fait." Melman 27-28.

Thus, as *The Falls*, *The Tattooed Girl*, *Beasts* and *Rape: A Love Story* show so well, Oates's fiction multiplies instances of incertitude. Rather than use detective fiction to demystify, she rewrites it to show that no event can ever be completely understood, no matter how talented the observer. Her mystery fiction shows us not how to solve puzzles, but how to accept the mysterious into our lives. The characters put forward as models are the ones that learn to accept the things they cannot know and continue living in spite of the gaps.

Discussing Emily Dickinson in a review, Oates postulates that a posthumous career might have been "the only career possible for one of such startlingly original gifts" for, she asks, "how does one see what is so radically new, still more how does one draw *meaning* from it?" Oates's career is not posthumous, however, the question of what meaning to draw from it still pertains. One understandably hesitates to apply the label "radically new" to Oates's work, and yet, how else can we refer to writing that eludes definition and categorization? Expounding on her question in relation to Dickinson's career, Oates discusses the seemingly incomplete nature of much of Dickinson's verse. The idea that Dickinson may have intended her poetry to be mutable is one that seems to particularly appeal to Oates who observes:

> It seems like a simple query, why a poem must be *singular* and not rather *plural*, as musical compositions in the mode of John Cage are not fixed and finite but ever-improvised. Perhaps it's only a convention, that the gravitas of print seems to insist upon permanence, and it's the 'route of evanescence' so magically embodied in Dickinson's poems that is the truest nature of poetry.[686]

Oates's work, too, seems to be expressly designed, to allow for the possibility of plural interpretations. A fellow writer, Richard Bausch, has said that "Joyce Carol Oates is a great American writer. An empire of characters and lives in fiction."[687] The scope of this dissertation has been to examine one neighborhood in one city in Joyce Carol Oates's

[686] Oates, "The Woman in White."
[687] Burns, "Off the Page: Joyce Carol Oates."

fictional world. The empire is much larger, of course, than the simple neighborhood explored, though the map I have drawn encourages the imagination of what lies beyond.

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INDEX