



THE SOCIO- PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL AND ITS REFRACTION IN THE WORK  
OF JOYCE CAROL OATES

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**Abstract:** In this article, we undertake a cultural analysis of Joyce Carol Oates' recent novels; that is, the study focuses on those novels in which Oates concentrates on the "moral and social conditions" of the American middle class. Indeed, over the last two decades, Oates has distanced herself from lower-class portrayals and has increasingly depicted the middle-class world, even though she retains great sympathy for the underprivileged and continues to write about social injustice.

**Key words:** moral, social problems, aggression, fame and failure, relationship.

In histories of American literature, Oates' name is often closely associated with those of Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, John Updike, John Cheever and Philip Roth, the so-called literary traditionalists of the 1970s. Some of Oates' work from the 1980s, meanwhile, has been compared with postmodernist fiction for its diversity of style and use of parody. During this period, Oates became "a kind of traditionalist John Barth, parodying the historical novel in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982), Hemingway or Mailer in an essay on boxing, and a whole array of forms and styles in other works." The *Encyclopedia of American Literature* asserts that Oates' best works include the novel *them*; *The Wheel of Love*, a collection of short stories that contains her most widely-anthologized short story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"; the novels, *Because It Is Bitter*, and *Because It Is My Heart* and *Black Water*; and the essay, "On Boxing." Judging from critical reception of her most recent works, the novels *Blonde* and *The Falls* also stand a good chance of being ranked among Oates' best works.

The first studies of Joyce Carol Oates' work appeared at the end of the 1970s. Since then, scholars of her work have had one difficulty in common: that of categorizing her work and assessing her achievements. Joanne V. Creighton, who has written two books on Oates' works, argues in her first book, *Joyce Carol Oates*,<sup>6</sup> that if Oates' depiction of psychological and environmental limitations places her within the tradition of American Naturalism, so her visionary perspective in the same works counters this tradition. In her second book, *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years*, Creighton claims that Oates' work belongs to traditional American Romanticism, due to her attention to personality and desire to transcend limitations. Creighton therefore suggests the term, "post-modern romantic," to characterize Oates. Oates herself has made the following comment on her technique: "My method has always been to combine the „naturalistic“ world with the „symbolic“ method of expression, so that I am always – or usually – writing about real people in real society, but the means of expression may be naturalistic,



surreal, or parodic. In this way I have, to my own satisfaction at least, solved the old problem – should one be faithful to the real world, or to one’s imagination?”

Oates’s work has been discussed from a number of different perspectives. Gary Frederic Waller claims that Oates is writing about the possibilities of transcendence, while Ellen Friedman in *Joyce Carol Oates* argues that in her novels, Oates calls for the limitation and deflation of the ego and unreasonable ambitions. In an examination of Oates’s tragic vision, Mary Kathryn Grant concludes that Oates’s tragedy, which arises from the absence of communal relationships and her characters’ isolation, is a tragedy without catharsis, and that her characters are often superficial. Grant also predicates that Oates’s strength as a writer primarily lies in her exploration of personality and more experimental modes of writing, rather than in her frequent use of 19th-century realist styles. For Gavin Cologne-Brookes, meanwhile, Oates’s significance lies in her practical approach to art, which serves as a tool for better understanding of social problems and opportunities. He argues that Oates is a pragmatic writer. For Malcolm Bradbury, Oates is especially important as a writer of gothic novels and stories; while Harold Bloom has claimed that only one novel, *Henry* (which addresses social problems, and is written in a naturalistic mode with some experimental features), will remain a lasting achievement.

An overwhelming diversity of forms and styles, then, is probably the most important characteristic of Oates’s oeuvre. Any further attempt to classify Oates thus becomes a real challenge. Joyce Carol Oates is a very versatile writer; as John Barth once noticed, she writes “all over the aesthetic map.” Most scholars adopt a chronological approach when classifying her work: “Early Novels, approximately 1960s-1970s,” “The Gothic Novels, 1980-1986” and “A Return to Realistic novels, from 1986 till today.” In each of these periods, a central topic is recognizable: the early novels focus on the lower classes and social problems; Oates’s gothic period includes experiments with 19th-century genres; and the realistic period investigates both the lower- and the middle classes, and focuses on moral and social issues inherent in American culture. Mature Oates, as Gavin Cologne-Brookes indicates, is “practicing the conventions of realism, both revise[s] and renew[s] them.” In addition, Oates remains interested in experimenting with styles and themes, uses pseudonyms, and writes popular fiction.

In this article, we undertake a cultural analysis of Joyce Carol Oates’s recent novels; that is, the study focuses on those novels in which Oates concentrates on the “moral and social conditions” of the American middle class. Indeed, over the last two decades, Oates has distanced herself from lower-class portrayals and has increasingly depicted the middle-class world, even though she retains great sympathy for the underprivileged and continues to write about social injustice. Joyce Carol Oates has a similar purpose: she shows how people experience alienation from their “inner needs,” and how this experience is manifested in their behavior and their choices of professions, career paths, consumption patterns, concepts of child-rearing, and understandings of status, success, fame and failure.

Although over the last two decades, Oates has shifted her attention from the lower classes to the middle classes, she has remained true to two themes that have marked her work from the beginning: namely, violence and personality. In an essay that is revealingly



entitled “Heart of Darkness,” Caroline Fraser aptly captures the essence of Oates’s fiction in two concepts, “victim- hood” and “personality.” A physically and emotionally abused young woman, or an intelligent man suffering from low self-esteem, caught amid forces that he or she cannot control, have consistently featured as the central characters in Oates’s fiction; from the novels written in the 1960s, such as *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, to recent works such as *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* and *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*. Like many of Oates’s critics, Fraser relates the violence depicted in Oates’s works to the writer’s own background and childhood. Joyce Carol Oates, born in 1938 in Lockport, Upstate New York, came from a poor farmer’s family, and was the first person in her family to finish high school. Acts of violence involving both people and animals were common during Oates’s childhood. Not only would the boys at grade school show great cruelty towards their peers, but Oates’s relatives were also involved in extremely violent incidents: her paternal great-grandfather “beat his wife with a hammer and then shot himself,” and her maternal grandfather “was murdered in a tavern brawl.” Her mother was given up for adoption due to sheer poverty. Later, Oates was herself a witness to violent riots in Detroit, and there were violent incidents involving students at the universities where she worked. Such incidents and living circumstances had a big impact on Oates’s perso- nality and serve as an “impetus behind much of her work.”

The influence of Oates’s childhood world on her later work and attitude towards life manifests itself in the many scenes of rape, abuse, prostitution, and physical violence in her fiction (for example, in novels such as *them*, *Wonderland*, *Cybele*, *Man Crazy*, *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*, *The Tattooed Girl*, and so forth). Her childhood may also be reflected in the mythologized landscapes of her novels, such as the idyllic High Point farm in *We Were The Mulvaney*s, or the raw and merciless scenery of Niagara Falls in *The Falls*. In her biographer’s words:

Her childhood experiences clearly gave rise to the paradoxical apprehension of the world that marked her adult sensibility: we inhabit a random, often frightening reality marked by ceaseless flux, violent dislocations, ugly surprises, and yet we manage in D.H. Lawrence’s sense of phrase, not only to „come through“ but to experience a nostalgic yearning to revisit and recreate that early turbulent world, to recall its austere beauty as well as its anxiety and terror.

Still, Oates often feels misunderstood by commentators and interviewers who raise the question of violence in her work. In her 1981 essay, “Why is Your Writing So Violent,” Oates insists that this question is “insulting,” “ignorant” and “sexist,” for everyone can judge from history that our world is violent and, on the whole, male authors would not be asked such a question.

It is assumed that aggression, discontent, rebellious urges, a sense of injustice – these have nothing to do with the outer world, but only with the sufferer; and if the sufferer is a woman, by definition a creature characterized by envy, how is it possible to take her seriously? The territory of the female artist should be the subjective, the domestic. She is allowed to be „charming,“ „amusing,“ „de- lightful.“ Her models should not be Shakespeare



or Dos- toyevsky but one or another woman writer. Her skills should be those of a conscientious seamstress.

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