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The drama of affluence in Joyce Carol Oates's recent novels

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THE DRAMA OF AFFLUENCE IN JOYCE CAROL OATES'S RECENT NOVELS

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For Eric, Lioné and Raimis

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Introduction

In a recent interview, Joyce Carol Oates stated that her work is concerned solely with the “moral and social conditions of her generation.”¹ Indeed, Oates has explored the life of “her generation” in more than 50 novels, including fiction for young adults, and more than 30 short story collections, novellas, dramas, essays, and volumes of poetry and literary criticism. Her reviews appear regularly in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, and in similar magazines and newspapers. She has also edited a number of collections of short stories and anthologies. Finally, in addition to being a writer, Joyce Carol Oates is also the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University.

In histories of American literature, Oates’s 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.² Some of Oates’s 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and styles in other works.”³ The *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* firmly states that, “regardless of the outdated complaints of some critics against her productivity and ability to write in so many literary forms, the range and depth of her oeuvre have made her undeniably, and deservedly one of the most distinguished and celebrated American authors.”⁴ The *Encyclopedia of American Literature*⁵ asserts that Oates’s 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’s best works.

The first studies of Joyce Carol Oates’s 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’s works, argues in her first

book, *Joyce Carol Oates*,⁶ that if Oates's 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*,⁷ Creighton claims that Oates's 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?"⁸

Oates's work has been discussed from a number of different perspectives. Gary Frederic Waller⁹ claims that Oates is writing about the possibilities of transcendence, while Ellen Friedman in *Joyce Carol Oates*¹⁰ 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 Grant¹¹ 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,¹² 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,¹³ Oates is especially important as a writer of gothic novels and stories; while Harold Bloom¹⁴ has claimed that only one novel, *them* (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."¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ In addition, Oates remains interested in experimenting with styles and themes, uses pseudonyms, and writes popular fiction.

In this study, I 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. Critics have discussed some of the novels portraying various aspects of middle-class life (novels which I call, for convenience' sake, the "middle-class novels"), but no study focuses exclusively on them. I view these novels as a thematic analysis of American middle-class life, as seen from Joyce Carol Oates's perspective. I argue that these novels by Oates reflect David Riesman's distinction between "inner-directed" and "other-directed" personalities. Riesman's classic study, *The Lonely Crowd*, explains "the way in which democracy, capitalism, bureaucracy, equalitarianism, mass society, or some other feature of social organization have destroyed the conditions of human autonomy and have alienated man from his human essence by forcing him to adjust to the needs of the system rather than to his inner needs."¹⁷ In my view, 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,"¹⁸ Caroline Fraser aptly captures the essence of Oates's fiction in two concepts, "victimhood" and "personality." A physically and/or 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."¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Such incidents and living circumstances had a big impact on Oates's personality and serve as an "impetus behind much of her work."²¹

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 Mulvaneys*, 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.²²

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,’ ‘delightful.’ Her models should not be Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky but one or another woman writer. Her skills should be those of a conscientious seamstress.²³

Furthermore, Oates writes that her “writing isn’t usually explicitly violent, but deals, most of the time, with the phenomenon of violence and its aftermath, in ways not unlike those of the Greek dramatists; in any case, writing is language and, in a very important sense, is more ‘about’ language than ‘about’ a subject...”²⁴ In a 2008 interview, Oates asserts that her views have not changed; she maintains that in her “writing, there is relatively little violence in fact, with the focus on the aftermath of violence and the ways in which individuals, often women and children, manage to survive, and to grow stronger.”²⁵ Although some recent novels, such as *We Were The Mulvaneys*, can be seen as proof of the truth of Oates’s remarks, other recent works, such as *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* (2007), the thriller *The Barrens* (2001) and the novella *Rape: A Love Story* (2005), do deal with the act of violence itself. Still, as I will show, generally speaking, physical violence and aggression are less common in Oates’s suburbs than psychological terror, hidden acts of domestic violence, neglect, and the abuse of children.

Next to violence and victimhood, the theme of “the problematic nature of the self”²⁶ occupies center stage in Oates’s work. Joanne Creighton argues that Oates’s vision is not dark at all; she is optimistic about transcendence, and her characters are strong and resilient. “She has tremendous respect for the dark side of human experience, for the mysterious depths of the unconscious and for the primitive brutality at the core of physical existence.”²⁷ While Caroline Fraser points to both the dissolution and creation of personality in Oates’s work, Joanne Creighton offers a more encompassing understanding of Oates’s attitude. For her, Oates attempts “to balance the almost dialectic dualities of consciousness and unconsciousness, male and female, public and private, inner and outer, self and other, life and fiction...”²⁸

Unlike the postmodern image of the floating and fragmented self, Oates's personalities are grounded in cultural and socio-historical contexts; often a bad experience provides a point of reference from which the person pulls her- or himself together and grows. The self in Oates's novels is often a composition of images or identities born out of different social roles, status, and economic and artistic goals; as is the case for her portrayal of Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde*, or the sheer struggle for survival described in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*. In her middle-class settings, Oates studies the relationship between upward mobility, personality, the construction and erosion of the self, and the tension between one's image and one's true self. If rural and physically violent conditions give birth to strong and earnest personalities, the more we move towards the realms of suburbia and celebrity culture, the more conformist and corrupt Oates's fictional world becomes. Writing to Gavin Cologne-Brookes, Oates suggested that, "the human adventure is perhaps the continuous, instinctive creation of personality and identity. Society is controlled by hierarchical means, the strong employing the less strong."²⁹ Creighton believes that Oates "does not take the structuralist view that devalues the individual and asserts the primacy of external shaping forces"; instead, "she retains the romantic notion of the uniqueness and the primacy of the individual."³⁰ Yet the struggle for power, political influence, fame, or even the bare struggle to survive, function as personality-shaping forces in both her deprived rural and comfortable suburban settings. I suggest that by employing motifs of struggle and social and environmental forces as character-defining factors, Oates seems to be alluding to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Oates's interpretation of the American Dream implies something similar to the idea of the survival of the fittest, not only economically, but also spiritually.³¹

Though her portrayals of violence and victimization, her elaborations on personality, and her concern with political and corporate corruption, suggest that Oates is intimately involved with contemporary American society, she manages to stay detached from contemporary ideological trends, whether these are political, ethnic, racial or gender-related. She simply refuses to reduce her work to one issue, allowing it to continue to reflect the complexity of modern America. In the past, Oates has been reproached for having remained aloof from feminist issues. Her response has been that she is sympathetic to "most of the aims of feminism, but cannot write feminist literature because it is too narrow, too limited."³² She tends to be more generic than specific in her subjects. Her writing is more about moral and social issues than about specific problems inherent to one societal group or another. For

instance, her novels *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart* (1990) and *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006), which are often considered to be Oates's response to racial issues in the United States, treat these issues as subordinate to a bigger picture. Over the past two decades, Oates has not really engaged in the multicultural and gender-related discourse that dominates American literature. Still, she reveals her sympathies by featuring relevant secondary characters in her middle-class novels, such as maids and nannies from the Philippines, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay. The ethnic dilemmas of the past – the New World's assimilation of Irish, Jewish, and Eastern European immigrants, and their economic and social problems – are given ample attention in *What I Lived For*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* and *The Tattooed Girl*. Oates's attitude to politics is similar. She believes that "literature should ideally be above politics, like poetry, transcend the ephemeral and the fleeting,"³³ and only refers to politicians when strictly necessary, so as to create a context for her work.

Influences

Oates strongly believes that "most novelists and poets are probably most powerfully influenced by their early surroundings: they wish to capture universal truths in the form of particular, even local types, and give life to the larger element of the human psyche by way of familiar images."³⁴ Oates's work suggests, however, that recognizing the influence that her predecessors have had on her writing, and taking distance from them, is also important to her. Oates admits that she has learned from great writers:

I love drama. I love the memorializing of places. I can read Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence almost as much for the landscape and for the cityscape as for the characters, because the landscape is so vividly portrayed. So when I write I try to do the same thing.³⁵

Lewis Carroll is the author to whom Oates often refers as her first inspiration. Oates received Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* from her grandmother when she was eight years old, and this book formed "the focal point of her earliest awareness of literature."³⁶ Her novels *With Shuddering Fall* and *Wonderland* contain numerous allusions to *Alice in Wonderland*. Jesse Harte, for example, the main character in *Wonderland*, changes shape by becoming obese and thin, just as Alice grows and shrinks;

and the title of the novel suggests a shifting American reality that is full of surprises, like the wonderland in which Alice finds herself.

Another writer who had a major influence on Oates's early years is William Faulkner. Greg Johnson identifies "Faulkner's mannerisms" and descriptions in her early short stories,³⁷ while Joanne Creighton recognizes Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in the "legendized retelling of family tales," "historical scope," and the "rhetorical flourish" and "circuitous treatment of time"³⁸ in *Bellefleur*. In a move reminiscent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Oates in her earlier novels and short stories has created her own world, called Eden County, which is based on her childhood experiences in Upstate New York. Some novels of the 1970s, such as *Childwold*, are entirely set in Eden County. Others, such as *Son of the Morning*, have their beginnings here. This imagined, economically-deprived, rural area, which is home to poor, often violent, and emotionally unstable people, stands for the simple and honest life close to the soil. It is a place where the veneer of civilization is very thin, and where people's lives are governed by primeval, uncontrollable forces. It is also a place where one can be brought close to the core, the essence of being, and draw strength from it, become cleansed. Though the name, "Eden County," is not used in her recent novels, Oates constantly returns to similar landscapes, as if herself to draw strength from them. Such is the case, for instance, with *Man Crazy*, *We Were The Mulvaneys*, and *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, to name but a few.

In addition to Faulkner, Oates has drawn upon the example of such writers as Hemingway (in her essay "On Boxing"), Fyodor Dostoyevsky, D.H. Lawrence, Herman Melville, Thomas Mann, Honoré de Balzac, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Flannery O'Connor; and upon that of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Plato, and Socrates; psychologists such as Freud and Jung; and scientists such as Charles Darwin. She sees similarities between Franz Kafka's writing and the gothic that she herself uses: "I don't think of gothic as being that different from the writing of Kafka – it's psychologically surreal writing – I feel very much at home with that, because I think our minds are like that."³⁹ Oates's gothic and horror also suggest the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Her novels and short stories are populated with murderers, crippled and supernatural creatures, and ghosts. Her characters live in castles that feature mysterious attics and unused rooms. Bad weather and deserted marshy landscapes create an atmosphere of apprehension. Mysteries run in families. Oates's scenes often have spine-chilling effects on the reader, and her characters' passions rage. Her novels often begin with one or more epigraphs taken from the works of various poets and

writers, and her texts bristle with allusions and quotations. In various interviews, Oates has mentioned Emily Dickinson, Flannery O'Connor, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf as important to her. She has also written many essays on classical writers, and often reviews the work of her contemporaries. In a letter to Joanne Creighton, she acknowledges, “I’ve been influenced in many ways by nearly everyone I’ve read, and I’ve read nearly everyone.”⁴⁰

On the one hand, Oates insists that, “it is dangerous to place too much emphasis upon influences.”⁴¹ On the other hand, she seems to actively flirt with such influences in her works. One of the ways that Joyce Carol Oates shows her indebtedness to and appreciation of her predecessors is to re-imagine their work, and to incorporate their subject matter, style and genre in her own work. This relatedness ranges from borrowing titles, to re-imaginings and parodies of plots and genres. The short story collection, *A Sentimental Education*, borrows its title from Flaubert’s novel, *A Sentimental Education (L’Éducation Sentimentale)*. *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* owes its title to a poem by Stephen Crane. *What I Lived For*, meanwhile, echoes a chapter of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.”

Oates’s desire to re-imagine also resulted in a number of short stories that were included in the collection, *Marriages and Infidelities* (1974). Oates has reworked short stories by Henry James (there are two versions of “The Turn of the Screw,” though not in the same collection), James Joyce, Anton Chekhov and Franz Kafka. In a 1972 interview given to Joe David Bellamy, Oates insisted that “these stories are meant to be autonomous stories, yet they are also testaments of my love and extreme devotion to these other writers; I imagine a kind of spiritual ‘marriage’ between myself and them ...”⁴² Though conceived as autonomous short stories, these stories inevitably invite comparison with the “originals.” In Joanne Creighton’s opinion, the relationship between the classical versions and Oates’s re-imaginings varies from being a parallel version of the original story (“Metamorphosis,” “Lady With a Pet Dog”) to bearing neither “thematic nor formal resemblance to the originals.”⁴³ These stories “could only have been envisioned as startling ironic contrasts”⁴⁴ (“Where I Lived and What I Lived For”). Such re-imaginings are not limited to the five stories in *Marriages and Infidelities*; indeed, re-imagining has become an important characteristic of Oates’s style. For instance, “The White Cat,” from the short story collection, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, recounts Poe’s “The Black Cat.”⁴⁵ Oates’s story is both an approximation of, and a departure from, Poe’s, reflecting Oates’s desire to

find out how a 150-year old plot might unfold in a contemporary American setting. The novel, *What I Lived For*, has thematic links with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and *A Bloodsmoor Romance* inverts the 19th-century romance genre. Theoretically, such "re-imagining" comes close to Linda Hutcheon's concept of postmodern parody as a "form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text."⁴⁶

For Oates, yet another way to relate to the literature of the past has been to imagine the last days of Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Henry James and Ernest Hemingway in her most recent collection of short stories, *Wild Nights* (2008) (a collection which is named after a poem by Emily Dickinson). Each short story epitomizes either a specific characteristic of a writer, or our attitudes towards writers and literature. For example, the story about Mark Twain points to his passion for adolescent girls, while Oates presents Emily Dickinson as a "RepliLuxe" robot, "a simulation of the historical 'Emily Dickinson' that isn't so complex of course as the original."⁴⁷ The function of a RepliLuxe is to "elevate" the boring lives of a married couple, by providing them with entertainment. Instead, the robot confronts them with the banality of their existence and the husband's brutality. The writers depicted in this collection are, in turn, confronted with something that they managed to avoid in their lives. Oates's Emily Dickinson's RepliLuxe is not only exposed to dull suburban life, but almost gets raped by her owner – experiences of brutality that Dickinson the poet successfully excluded from her work. Oates's Hemingway, on the day he died, "wanted to write of ... the profound mysteries of the world outside him and the profound mysteries of the world inside him."⁴⁸

Oates herself has also influenced other writers. One such case that has received some attention in the media is that of Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of *Everything is Illuminated*, who studied with Oates at Princeton University. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, he expresses his gratitude to Oates for her support: she was the person who took his writing seriously, and encouraged him to write.⁴⁹ Another writer, Chris Bohjalian, states that he "learned about the importance of voice – and the role of person in fiction"⁵⁰ from Oates. Certainly, more acknowledgments will follow in the future.

Methodology

The goal of this study is to examine the ways in which Oates's recent novels represent the American middle classes. To achieve this goal, over the following five chapters, I approach Oates's work thematically, and draw on sociological, historical, and cultural-philosophical sources to set her novels in

context. In particular, I draw on analyses of the American Dream, American culture of the 1950s, 1990s and the present day, studies of American society and character in general, and popular culture and media studies. Last but not least, I examine American suburban and city life, and the unique nature of its social relations. I base my observations on the works of such scholars as Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, David Riesman, Martin Halliwell, Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, Christopher Lasch, Catherine Jurca, Kenneth Jackson, Marie Caputi, Seymour Martin Lipset, Samuel Huntington, Warren Susman, Neil Postman, Daniel Boorstin, Richard Dryer, and Graeme Turner.

Since my primary interest lies in the development of Oates's vision in recent years, and her views on the middle classes and suburbia, I have chosen to focus on the novels of the 1990s and later. In the works that particularly interest me, Oates sets her gaze on the life of America's middle- and upper classes, a focus that most probably results from her own "setting" in the affluent community of Princeton. So as to preserve this focus, the following novels are not discussed in detail: *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart* (1990), because it deals with social and racial issues affecting the lower classes; *The Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993) and *Man Crazy* (1997), because these novels investigate lower-class and young adult problems; *I'll Take You There* (2002), which focuses on sorority and young adult problems; and *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006), on the grounds that it depicts young adults in an academic setting, and examines racial issues.

The chapters of this study are organized in such a way as to reflect the transition portrayed in Oates's fiction, from stable lives rooted in traditional values, towards the fragmented and fast-changing lifestyles of the post-industrial era. On one end of the scale, we have "inner-directed" reliable characters; at the other end, we find the "other-directed," "floating" world of the media and popular culture. In turn, the sources that I draw upon also reflect this continuum between two extremes of American culture.

In the first chapter, I examine Oates's portrayals of women and mothers in her recent novels. I argue that in these novels, Oates looks with nostalgia towards the lives of rural and small-town middle-class Americans, and indicates her disappointment in suburban lifestyles and the women who embrace them. I briefly examine her first short stories, in which she introduced the fictionalized setting of Eden County, and suggest that motifs from this economically-deprived world later reappear in Oates's middle-class rural and suburban world. Oates hereby remains a social critic, exposing the dark underside of the romanticized image of the 1950s nuclear family, and of the pursuit of fame at the end of the 20th century.

Oates repeatedly returns to Eden County or similar landscapes, on the one hand to show her disapproval of physical and psychological violence, and on the other hand, to express feelings of longing for the rural past. In the novels that are set in small-town or rural Upstate New York, her female characters fall into two categories: they are either subordinate housewives trying to live up to the norm of traditional family values, or women who openly reject such values and cut themselves off from their communities and relatives. Despite the violence and social pressures that are experienced by these women, there is stability to be found; the evils of consumption, quick success and hedonistic lifestyles are kept outside such settings. Oates romanticizes what Susman calls “character,” a type that lies between Victorian morals on the one hand, and the ideal of hard-working American Protestant on the other. Next to this, Oates explores what Riesman calls “inner-directed” characters, people who listen to their inner values, rather than adapt themselves in line with their neighbor’s wishes. The following novels capture this vision of womanhood: *Mother, Missing; We Were The Mulvaneys; The Falls* and *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*.

Next, I examine Oates’s critique of suburban mothers who are engrossed in a search for fame. In *What I Lived For* and *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*, Oates depicts her female characters in satirical and grotesque ways. The contrast between these latter women and her realist, melodramatic portrayals of “rural” women indicates Oates’s disapproval of bohemian lifestyles. For Oates, memory and the past are sources that people can draw upon in order to live a satisfactory life. I suggest that Oates herself is balanced between idealization of and nostalgia for an earnest life lived in rural landscapes, characterized by life-changing, if sometimes invisible, social problems. She revises tradition and the past, and she also insists on memorializing the past as a source of emotional stability.

The second chapter focuses on the interpretation of failure and success in corporate and political life, and in life as a whole. In the essay, “Notes on Failure,” Oates suggests that failure can be even more motivating than success: “Success is distant and illusory, failure one’s loyal companion, one’s stimulus for imagining that the next book will be better, for otherwise, why write?”⁵¹ Oates views the drive to succeed in America’s public and corporate life as extreme, portraying a world in which parents are ready to sacrifice even their own children in order to be successful. In this chapter, I examine traditional American symbols of success, such as work, upward mobility, conspicuous consumption and property ownership. I argue that in Oates’s view, affluence releases people from their obligations and commitments. Her

characters lose touch with the most important human values, and get carried away by their dreams of quick success and fame. They constantly adjust their norms and values in accordance with others' wishes, echoing Riesman's other-directed character type. I suggest that Union City, the setting for the action in *What I Lived For*, is a metaphor for contemporary America. Union City's destruction is supposed to warn us about the negative effects of short-term investment and the desire for bigger and faster profits. In this chapter, I mainly discuss *What I Lived For*, while also drawing on *Black Water* and *My Heart Laid Bare*.

Another aspect of success, which arises when one has reached the top of the social ladder and has nowhere left to climb, is devastating boredom. In Chapter three, I argue that boredom in contemporary society is often related to feelings of futility, and the sense that one's life has become meaningless. The scholars Christopher Lasch and Reinhard Kuhn have suggested that boredom is caused by a loss of belief in higher truths, which have become obscured by consumer culture. Drawing on the novels *Middle Age: A Romance* and *American Appetites*, I argue that Oates traces the causes of devastating boredom in America's upper classes to a combination of exclusivity, isolation, traditional upper-class mentalities, the Protestant work ethic and individualism. In Oates's view, one can find life's meaning and dispel such overwhelming boredom through the rediscovery of one's authenticity and individuality. Oates suggests that it is important to remain authentic in private and public, to avoid hypocrisy, and not to live a "double life." I suggest that Oates discerns tragedy in the private lives of the upper classes, and portrays their public appearances as shallow, vain, comic and satirical. The "good life" turns out to be an anesthetized form of existence.

Chapter four looks into the dark side of the ultimate success story: what happens when "rural stability" is discarded, and hedonistic, celebrity-inspired lifestyles take over. This chapter focuses on three novels, *Blonde*, *Broke Heart Blues* and *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*, which examine life in the celebrity world. I suggest that Oates fears celebrity culture's gradual penetration into middle- and upper-middle-class lifestyles. The "naturalness" of rural life is forgotten, while real existence is transferred onto the television screen or the pages of tabloid newspapers. Oates shows how Baudrillard's "hyperreality" can become part of everyday life. She fears that our sole focus on entertainment will eventually destroy us, just as Neil Postman indicates (using Huxley's metaphors) that, "what we love will ruin us."⁵² As far as the lives of the stars are concerned, Oates's portrayal of Marilyn Monroe may appear moralistic and clichéd, but her concern about

superficiality, frivolity and immaturity is pertinent. Oates rejects the common portrayal of Monroe as a mere playmate and exposes the destruction of an individual on her way to stardom. For her, life is often a struggle (be it economic or spiritual), especially in the world of celebrities.

Chapter five explores how Oates challenges the limits of historical and modern romance, thriller and detective genres, and how she blends facts and fiction in her work, both embracing popular fiction and parodying the post-modern novel. Oates has never been a purely high-brow writer, but in the 1990s, she made a pronounced turn towards popular genres, such as the thriller. She is known for using gothic in much of her work, and over the last few decades, she has continued to do so. Just like many writers of genre fiction, Oates publishes her shorter and lighter crime fiction under pseudonyms, those of Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly. As Brenda Daly suggests, “she apparently decided that only by using a pseudonym could she reach the much larger audience of crime novels.”⁵³ Daly believes that Oates’s wish to reach readers “outside the academy” is consistent with “the vision of her fiction which honors ordinary Americans, regardless of educational level, social class, gender, race, sexuality, or age.”⁵⁴ It could be argued that Oates’s interest in popular fiction genres indeed parallels the position that she has taken as a social observer and critic of American culture, and thereby yields better insights into culture itself.

Chapter 1

The Fate of Women: Eden County Motifs in Oates's Recent Novels

In her first book, the collection of short stories *By The North Gate*,¹ Joyce Carol Oates introduces the reader to the fictional location, Eden County, which is modeled on her native Erie County. Situated in Upstate New York, Eden County mostly consists of rural landscapes dotted with existing cities and towns, such as Buffalo, Lockport and Chautauqua, and the fictional towns of Derby, Yewville, Marsena and Port Oriskany. Life is hard in Eden County; its inhabitants often have to fight to survive in dire economic conditions, and are subject to uncontrollable natural and social forces. They are simple, uneducated folk, working hard in industry or agriculture to make ends meet.

Commenting on the short stories in *By The North Gate*, Greg Johnson states that “Oates is here [in Eden County] staking out her own postage stamp of earth, its ironic name suggesting an allegorical microcosm of humanity in general and, in particular, of an American paradise lost, its bewildered inhabitants spilled out into a ruthless, barren world where mere survival is a kind of triumph.”² He argues that in her depiction of Eden County in this collection, Oates draws on the works of William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Friedrich Nietzsche. Johnson perceives Faulkner’s influence in both Oates’s concept of Eden County, which resembles Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, and in Oates’s allegorical manner of storytelling. For instance, the demonic figure of patriarch Rockland in “Ceremonies” echoes Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom Absalom!* The first-person plural narration of “Ceremonies” recalls Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” Johnson discerns O’Connor’s influence, meanwhile, in Oates’s perception of the modern world in terms of “its random violence, symbolic of its loss of social cohesion or philosophical meaning.”³ If O’Connor’s characters have to “collide” with divine grace, then Oates’s characters have to face a “potentially overwhelming convergence of forces – natural, social, psychological.”⁴ Lastly, Johnson recognizes Nietzsche’s influence in Oates’s depictions of struggles for power, her subversion of romantic visions of nature and human love, and her ironic “vision of Christian civilization.”⁵

Oates's Eden County is dominated by violence, passion, poverty, economic struggle, brutality and mindless cruelty. In one short story, "Swamps," a mad, homeless woman kills her newborn baby. In "By the North Gate," three teenage boys viciously kill a dog, Nell, which had been an old farmer's only companion. "Boys at Picnic" features a gang of boys who drive around, eventually kill a young girl in a church, and then go to a picnic. All of these killings are carried out in an emotionless and often motiveless manner. Another story, "The Census Taker," pictures a census taker who is confronted with poverty, a sense of disillusionment with his work, and a boy and a strange (if not mad) girl. "Pastoral Blood," meanwhile, is centered on a girl who "had never felt anything,"⁶ who in her search for feeling instigates a gang rape on herself. The most depressing aspect of the collection is the absence of any possibility of change and the characters' emotional deadness, as if their lives had been determined by higher powers and the events depicted were fated to happen. Yet, each story is also about madness, with Oates exploring the blurred line between sanity and insanity.

As Sanford Pinsker argues, Oates's work has affinities with naturalism, but is not "merely an extension of Naturalism,"⁷ her early fiction suggests "that determinism alone will never provide all the pieces of the human puzzle; stubborn parts will always remain, stubbornly unexplainable."⁸ Those who desire another kind of life must escape from Eden County, like Clara Walpole in *A Garden Of Earthly Delights* (1966). Its hardships included, this dark world has a special place in Oates's oeuvre: Eden County is a place where one is confronted with formidable forces of nature and the bestial side of humanity, where pretense and polished manners seem out of place. Such circumstances teach people a lot about themselves, and force them to face up to their true natures. Having introduced Eden County in her first book, over the years, Oates has constantly returned to it, as if needing to withdraw from her civilized, middle-class life, regain her strength, retune her thoughts and emotions, and process her own painful childhood memories. In her diary, for example, she wrote: "...it all just drained out of me. Like poison draining out of my blood. Like I had been, sick, infected and hadn't known it until the poison was gone."⁹ With each return, her narratives tend to become more biographical: *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007), for instance, is based on her grandmother's life story. Oates also uses similar landscapes that are populated with ordinary people as "remedies" for her characters. In *Middle Age: A Romance* (2001), for example, Oates "sends" her character Augusta Cutler to the plains of North Dakota and Montana, in order to "heal" the wounds inflicted by her anesthetizing upper-middle-class lifestyle.

The term “Eden County” is itself an ironic twist on the Garden of Eden, an idealistic metaphor for the New World. The notion of America as the New Jerusalem or the New Israel – “a new city where the New Adam would finally see his mission fulfilled”¹⁰ – was popular among 17th-century newcomers, and remains part of American ideology today. Mary Caputi indicates that writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville argued “that America saw itself as the New Garden of Eden located outside chronological time, a nation of pioneers on a spiritual journey unlike that traveled by Europe.”¹¹ In their work, they “dispel[led] any pretense that America truly equals a New Jerusalem” and is but a continuation “of European experience on American soil.”¹² Despite the country’s many problems, the American Dream has proven to be remarkably durable; America is still viewed as a land of plenty, where everyone has a chance to make their fortune. Mary Caputi asserts that “so much of our self-definition rests on a conviction that America consistently demonstrates the power of a can-do, an against-all-odds attitude capable of delivering a wealth of splendid results.”¹³ In Oates’s view, this idealized picture of America obscures many harsh realities. For her, exposing the hopelessness and meaninglessness of the lives of Eden County’s inhabitants is a way of showing that there is more to the American Dream than making money and the idealization of family life.

Early in her career, in novels such as *With Shuddering Fall* and *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Oates mainly focused on naturalistic portrayals of Eden County or comparable locations. For example, the beginning of *A Garden of Earthly Delights* depicts the lives of poverty-stricken seasonal workers in the 1930s. Sharleen, the daughter of a seasonal worker, Carleton Walpole, was “a thin, nervous sallow child with scabs on her arms and legs... The scabs looked like ordinary scabs except they were hard and thick, and when she picked them off, the wounds bled again and formed new scabs.”¹⁴ The adults are battered and broken: the women are exhausted by pregnancies, hard work and their rough lifestyle, the men by drinking and fighting. These people are hardly able to contain their anger: in one of the fights

Carleton could have killed him [his opponent], though. He had had to hold himself back. A terrible thirst had welled up in him, something dry and choking all the way down to his stomach and up to his mouth, and he had had to switch on his mind and turn it up high, like a radio blaring an alarm to make himself stop kicking the man’s face.”¹⁵

While Oates has frequently revisited this economically deprived area, populated with unsophisticated people leading dull lives, over time, her portrayals have become somewhat milder. Similarly devastating motifs to those presented in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* are featured in Oates's recent novels about the lower classes, such as *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), or *Man Crazy* (1997).

In this chapter, however, I will discuss the portrayal of women and mothers in six of Oates's recent novels, four of which are set in Upstate New York, in Eden County, or similar rural areas; and two which are set in cities and suburbs beyond Eden County. The "rural" novels – *We Were The Mulvaneys*, *The Falls, Mother, Missing* and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* – offer realistic portrayals of life in a mixture of realist and naturalist styles. I argue that Oates has more faith in, and appreciation of, life in rural America, and in the resilient and (to use David Riesman's term) "inner-directed" characters¹⁶ living there, than in the "other-directed" inhabitants of suburbia. In addition, I suggest that the microcosm of Eden County, with its play of aggression and formidable forces, remains important in Oates's recent novels, even though she shifts the action to the rural middle classes and devises happy endings for her characters. The "suburban" narratives examined in this chapter – *What I Lived For* (which is also set in New York State, in the fictional Union City) and *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (which is set in a rich New Jersey suburb) – are, in turn, satiric tales of vanity and corruption. Certainly, the gloomy realism of Eden County is closer to Oates's heart than these affluent suburbs. My aim in this chapter is to explore how Oates portrays American women in these novels, in their roles as mothers, daughters and professionals, and in the context of their communities and traditional family values. I also contrast Oates's traditional female characters with liberated women and mothers.

Writing about her generation's past and that of her family, Oates emphasizes the importance of roots, history, and symbols that denote historic events and connect us with previous generations. Oates looks back on Eden County and the 1950s with both nostalgia and a critical eye. For her, as I show in the course of this chapter, the past has a mythical quality. Oates is particularly drawn to the idea of an honest, traditional life, set against the background of a ruthless and indifferent nature. For Oates, however, this past should be reexamined, and its romanticized aspects – such the idealization of the 1950s – should be exposed. Even though the novels that Oates wrote in the 1990s tend to end happily, with their epilogues featuring family reunions and

reconciliations, the reality depicted in these narratives is both hard and pitiless.

The Nuclear Family and Family Values

The family is a central concern in Oates's fiction: family values, female and male roles within the family, and the relationship between families and communities. The novels that I have chosen to discuss in this chapter address American family life during the second half of the 20th century. In *We Were The Mulvaneys*, Oates uses flashbacks to cover the period between the 1950s and 1993; *The Falls* opens in 1950 and finishes in 1978; *Mother, Missing* starts in 2004, but works its way back to the 1960s; and again, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* is a chronological account (with the exception of its prologue, which is set in the 1950s) of a life lived between 1936 and 1999; *What I Lived For* focuses on one weekend in 1992; and *My Sister, My Love* is set in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century. Although Oates is quite particular about dates and periods, and shows how families are affected by the times in which they are living, the outer world is rarely permitted to intrude on her fictional settings. Thus, while time passes and the cultural context of the nuclear family changes, Oates's families do not dwell on contemporary politics and international events, such as the Vietnam War.

A key focus of these six novels is the concept of the nuclear family and the role of traditional family values, something that has been a controversial issue during recent presidential election campaigns. Sources differ as to when the concept of the nuclear family was first conceived; some suggest the 1920s, others the period following the Second World War.¹⁷ Although the phenomenon was recognized in 17th- and 18th century Europe, it was in the United States that this way of organizing society became the norm:

The family unit became a symbol of security and a return to traditional gender roles. Distinct from the wartime period in which women held jobs conventional for men, the postwar era encouraged the notion that men should be the primary wage earners and women should spend their time cultivating the home and exerting their energy towards raising children.¹⁸

In the 1950s, a majority of American households could be defined as "nuclear" or "modern family households," with the husband as the breadwinner, and the wife keeping house and caring for the children. Due to the post-war economic boom, a large number of American working class families

could afford to move to the suburbs and conform to the celebrated nuclear family norm. While the 1960s brought barely-visible cultural shifts, a real cultural revolution occurred in the 1970s. At the end of that decade, according to Daniel Yankelovich,¹⁹ 72% of the Americans were engrossed in “the quest for self;” meaning that they were trying to improve their existence, and to get more out of life than mere economic satisfaction. The strict norms of family life that had prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s were replaced with

pluralism and freedom of choice: to marry or live together; to have children early or to postpone them, perhaps forever; to come out of the closet or stay in; to keep the old job or return to school; to make commitments or hang loose; to change careers, spouses, houses, states of residence, states of mind.²⁰

In 2000, roughly equal numbers of households consisted of nuclear families, singles, and married couples without children,²¹ each making up 25-30% of the population. In view of the diversity of family types, sociologists suggest the term, “postmodern family,” which includes single parent families and childless couples.²²

This change in the American nuclear family, argues Martha Nussbaum, was brought about by feminism and by the lesbian/gay rights movement. Once women “have become more independent in the larger society, women have been reluctant to accept bad bargains, and they avoided early marriage and childbearing and have been quicker to seek or accept divorce.”²³ If feminism has liberated women from male authority, at least to a certain extent, the lesbian/gay rights movement has stirred deeper emotions. For traditional men, women who do not desire men provoke feelings of fear, and gay men “are often seen as men who refuse the civilizing influence of the female, and who pursue pleasure at the expense of social responsibility as parents.”²⁴ In America, as elsewhere in the world, battle lines have been drawn over the rights of gay and lesbian couples to marry and to adopt children. Oates addresses women’s issues and often examines them meticulously in her narratives, but her women are not conscious feminists; instead, as will be shown later in this chapter, they tend to be rather passive and submissive. She also incorporates women’s issues into wider social contexts, such as class-related and social problems. In her opinion, “most women writers have been narrow... Some have been narrow and deep; but to be narrow and deep is still to be *narrow*.”²⁵ As far as lesbian and gay issues are concerned, Oates’s approach is even more reserved: she sometimes includes a

motif that highlights a particular aspect of the social fabric, but she does not tread further than this. One such motif occurs in *The Falls*, in a scene that I discuss later in this chapter.

Oates seeks to demonstrate that the American family of the 1950s was not always as happy as has been claimed, and that the choices made in families were shortsighted and impulsive. Her narratives imply that the ideal of the nuclear family and the notion of “family values” are detached from the reality of American life, and that other types of families have, in fact, always existed. In *We Were The Mulvanneys*, the husband, Michael Mulvaney, abuses and eventually leaves his wife, Corinne. Rebecca Schwart in *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* flees her husband, Niles Tignor, and cares for her child alone for a number of years. Ariah Burnaby in *The Falls* refuses to accept insurance money after her husband’s death, and goes on to earn her living and to raise her children alone. In *Mother, Missing*, meanwhile, the ideal wife and mother, Gwen Eaton, turns out not to have been the happy woman that everyone supposed her to be. In general, Oates’s fiction suggests that happy nuclear families in America simply do not exist, just as America is not a “New Garden of Eden,” as the first settlers claimed. In one review, Oates writes:

the chimera of ‘family values’ was an adroitly manipulated issue in the 2004 Presidential election, and nostalgia for a lost Eden remains an obsessive American theme. Each generation is convinced that life was better, and certainly more ‘moral,’ in the past, no matter what the actual conditions of the past.²⁶

Mary Caputi believes that politicians idealize the past, and especially the 1950s, in order to manipulate people’s feelings; they look for confirmation of something positive in the past to provide a desirable vision of the future. Neoconservatives draw on the 1950s in presidential campaigns because this period, for them, offers a “reliable matrix through which to read our culture.”²⁷ The 1950s serve as an ideal of stability, prosperity and certainty, in contrast to a postmodern era that is characterized by fluidity, multiculturalism and economic fluctuations. “The 1950s now function as a highly-charged trope surrounded by a host of associations that Americans educe even in the absence of full elaboration.”²⁸ Conservatives simply tend to ignore the decade’s complexities, while emphasizing its positive aspects.

Oates’s portrayals of the 1950s offer a stark contrast to the stereotypical image of the decade. Mary Caputi describes the latter as follows: “Dad at the office in a double-breasted suit with cuffed pants, Mom at home wearing a

ruffled apron and a string of pearls, kids in striped T-shirts bicycling through well-kept neighborhoods.”²⁹ Oates’s 1950s lower-class family in *The Grave-digger’s Daughter*, however, lives in “a ramshackle old farm house at the end of a dirt lane.”³⁰ Dad carries a gun and beats Mom and his son, and Mom wears “filth-stiffened work clothes”³¹ and works in a factory assembly room, where she “had been nauseated by the smell, the rapid pace, the noise.”³² Meanwhile, middle-class Gwen Eaton in *Mother, Missing*, although she looks good and is not physically abused by her husband, suffers emotional and psychological abuse, and has to subordinate her own needs to those of others.

Mother, Missing is the novel that comes closest to depicting the 1950s ideal housewife, in the person of Gwen Eaton. Oates first creates this image by showing how Gwen was regarded by her daughters and by her community, and then deconstructs it in the process of revealing Gwen’s private story. Gwen Eaton is murdered at the beginning of the narrative. The novel is written from the point of view of Nikki Eaton, her rebellious daughter, who has purple punk hair and wears funky thrift shop clothes, and who works as a features writer at a local newspaper. After her mother’s death, Nikki becomes interested in her past, and gradually discovers who her mother really was. The plot is based on Nikki’s rediscovery of her mother, her grief, and how she learns to appreciate Gwen as an individual.

In order to evoke the atmosphere of a small-town, middle-class neighborhood, Oates describes houses with well-kept lawns and swimming pools, their residents participating in community and church activities. Gwen fills her life with cooking, cleaning, art classes, sewing, knitting afghans, and making “coral shell knickknacks and vases”³³ and potpourri; she attends church and sings in the church choir, and makes numerous visits to relatives and friends living in the neighborhood. Everything in her life is stable and under control. The motifs of food and handicrafts prevail in Oates’s descriptions. The housewife’s identification with the act of cooking is so pervasive that Gwen has to prepare her husband’s favorite Waldorf salad for his funeral buffet. In turn, Gwen’s relatives and friends serve baked bread from their freezers at her funeral buffet. A woman’s best quality is her skill in preparing food; if her cooking is accepted and respected, then she is also accepted. It is a way to the town’s communal heart.

Others only perceive Gwen Eaton’s main role; her husband’s relatives “tended to take Gwen for granted as just a housewife/mother who’d married right out of high school.”³⁴ Hardly anyone, including her daughters, ever thinks of her as a person. It is this popular assumption – the insignificance of the individual, especially the female individual, within the nuclear family –

that Oates challenges in the novel. Only after Gwen's death does Nikki discover that her mother was not always a "smiling Gwen Eaton" ready to fulfill others' wishes, and that she had a private life prior to getting married. Apparently, her marriage to Jon Eaton was not perfect, but the couple had managed to hide this from their daughters. Nikki's father was aggressive and possessive, and did not appreciate Gwen's involvement with her side of the family. The narrative suggests that although marriage allowed Gwen to escape the harsh reality of her previous life – Eden County poverty and her mother's suicide – she felt more comfortable with her lower-class cousins than with her middle-class in-laws, for whom she was only a housewife. It also appears that Gwen was considering leaving her husband, but did not dare to do so. Given that it was in her nature not to hurt anyone and to be obedient, she was trapped in her role and was unable to change her life.

In the novel, public morals are embodied in the person of Aunt Tabitha, Gwen's sister-in-law, whose judgmental voice reminds us of the 19th-century narrator in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (see chapter five of this study). Aunt Tabitha sets the rules regulating nuclear family life. In her opinion, for a woman to leave her husband is "absurd",³⁵ "such notions wouldn't have been welcome, in [her] house."³⁶ The way to prevent your wife from leaving you is to "close out your joint checking account, [your wife] won't go anywhere."³⁷ Jeffrey Hart writes that during the 1950s, women's and girls' magazines implied that "marriage and motherhood were every woman's sole destiny and reason for existence."³⁸ He believes that "the neo-Victorian aspect of the Fifties, in manners and morals, represents a temporary reaction against the far reaching social convulsions of the war years. The settled life of family and suburb, of middle class respectability, acquired a new aura of desirability."³⁹ The secure and comfortable lifestyle offered by the nuclear family might have been a goal for women with Eden County backgrounds, such as Gwen Eaton, but Oates implies that they were discontented with their restricted tasks and roles.

We Were The Mulvanneys examines what can happen when, despite projecting an ideal, happy image, a family is unable to defend its members or protect its interests when disaster strikes. Corinne is married to the well-to-do Michael Mulvaney, and has four children. The family lives on the prosperous High Point Farm with dozens of animals and birds. The perfect harmony of their lives is destroyed when the daughter, Marianne, is sexually assaulted. Michael cannot deal with the resulting loss of dignity, turns to alcohol and finally dies. Corinne, meanwhile, remains in denial about the tragic situation for the best part of the narrative. When she finally takes measures to save her

family and the farm, they prove to be inadequate. Rather than caring for Marianne, she sends her daughter away, and Marianne experiences a long period of self-destruction followed by healing. The whole family is dispersed. The family is reunited in the epilogue, having undergone a redemption and slow recovery. They have paid a high price, however, in the form of many years spent in loneliness, psychological breakdown, and the search for truth.

In her portrayal of Corinne Mulvaney, Oates explores the tension between being a good mother and being a good wife; roles that, according to traditional family values, should be complementary or even inseparable. Through the reminiscences of the narrator, the youngest son Judd, we learn that prior to the rape, Corinne had been a happy, traditional housewife. In this part of the narrative, Oates paints a romantic image of Corinne; she alludes to Cybele,⁴⁰ the Goddess of Nature and Fertility, in whose myths nature and human life are seen as one. Corinne is the creator of her farm, her environment and her world, and has given birth to three sons and one daughter. Just like one of the variations on Cybele's myth, in which Cybele's partner Attis is also her son, Corinne regards herself as the mother of her husband: "here was her first love, her firstborn. The others, the children born of her body, even Marianne, were hardly more than dreams, ripples on the surface of dark impenetrable water. From this man, from his body, their bodies had sprung."⁴¹ More than any other character in the narrative, she is identified with nature; she is associated with some original idea, or eternal truth, that is independent of time. Corinne feels linked to life's very core, something like "dark impenetrable water" that cannot be understood by simple human beings. For Corinne, marriage is sacred and made by God, meaning that she feels responsible not only for her children, but also for her husband:

It seemed to her she could not hold him tight enough, enclosed enough; she would have wished to envelop him with her body, as one might a small child, an infant, drawing him somehow inside her, stilling the terrible agitation of his thoughts. Oh, if she could swallow him up! Save him!⁴²

Corinne shows much more independence of spirit than Gwen Eaton: although she cooks a great deal and makes clothes, she does not bury her identity among casseroles and fabrics. She creates High Point Farm to resemble the biblical Garden of Eden, and collects antiques as a hobby. Mulvaney Roofing provides the family with a source of income; and High Point Farm features a storybook lavender house that has "no style," that "was styles, a

quick history of American architecture.”⁴³ Its surroundings attract photographers and offer a haven from the hectic world, a counterbalance to commerce and markets. Corinne’s competition-free domain is a source of pleasure and recreation, a place where one can develop one’s creativity and self-expression, and where one can explore and develop relationships with one’s relatives, neighbors, farm hands, domestic animals and wildlife:

I’ve said there were six in our family but that’s misleading. Six is such a small number! In fact High Point Farm was busy and complicated and to a child confusing as a stage play in which familiar and unfamiliar faces are ceaselessly coming and going. Friends, relatives, houseguests, Dad’s business contacts, hired help – every day and frequently every hour you could count on it that *something was happening*. ... We owned horses, dairy cows, goats, a few sheep, chickens and guinea fowl and geese and semi-tame mallard ducks.⁴⁴

As “goddess” of High Point farm, Corinne manages her domain according to principles of justice and equality – principles that have played a key role throughout human history. People, domestic animals, wild animals, carnivores and herbivores live on the farm, pass through, or die there. Each human being and animal is treated with equal respect, in light of their natures and differences, “as if animals aren’t human, too.”⁴⁵ All of them are considered to be individuals; each has a name. It is a perfect place in which to raise children, and in which to teach them how to connect with nature and with all living beings.

Wise and stable as she may first appear, Corinne is unable to cope in the aftermath of Marianne’s rape. The family’s downfall – which is symbolically represented by the loss of the farm through bankruptcy, that is, expulsion from the Garden of Eden to Eden County – does not occur as a result of the rape itself, but rather as a result of the parents’ attempts to help their daughter and the rest of the family. The narrator, Corinne’s son, believes in “uttering the truth, even if it hurts. Particularly if it hurts.”⁴⁶ He adds, however, that his truth may be viewed differently by different people; something that “might seem to be implausible or inexplicable at a distance... isn’t implausible or inexplicable from within.”⁴⁷ Oates is thus asking, if Corinne Mulvaney’s decision to banish her daughter in order to protect her husband from bad thoughts was understandable and justifiable, was it morally acceptable from the daughter’s point of view?

Oates's mother and daughter in this novel – Corinne and Marianne – are surprisingly submissive characters. This can be explained, to an extent, by Corinne's perception of her wifely duties within the nuclear family, and the family's religious background. Corinne is determined to live up to the ideal of the American nuclear family: "maintaining the intactness of the family, making money and earning the respect of the others."⁴⁸ When she decides her daughter's fate, Corinne takes neither her own nor her daughter's wishes into account, only her husband's desire, "I wish to God I never had to lay eyes on her again."⁴⁹ Nussbaum, in turn, shows that distortions in authentic desires can be produced by "(1) lack of information or false information about the fact; (2) lack of reflection or deliberation about norms; (3) lack of options."⁵⁰ Oates is suggesting that women had few prospects in a small community in Chautauqua County in the 1970s; they could not follow their own desires due to a lack of options, or an imagined lack of options, and ideological pressures prevented them from being able to freely form their own opinions on family values.

In addition to looking at how the surrounding world can limit women's choices, Oates also considers the limitations arising from within. Nussbaum observes that until recently, people's subjective preferences and desires were treated as given, rather than being shaped by social circumstances and becoming distorted or deformed:

Empirically it has been amply demonstrated that people's desires and preferences respond to their beliefs about social norms and their own opportunities. Thus people usually adjust their desires to reflect the level of their available possibilities: they can get used to having luxuries and mind the absence of these very much and they also can fail to form desires for things their circumstances have placed out of reach.⁵¹

In her portrayal of motherhood, Oates suggests that these women's preferences are shaped both by social influences and by the characters' personalities – their resilience and perseverance. In the cases of Rebecca Schwart in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* and Ariah in *The Falls*, for instance, these mothers care for their children alone and earn their own incomes (although Ariah demonstrates another kind of blindness, namely, denying the importance of social involvement). Rebecca, like Clara Walpole in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, strives to secure a better future for her son by manipulating and exploiting others. These women underscore the ridiculousness of Aunt

Tabitha's opinion, that it is "absurd" for a woman to leave her husband (*Mother, Missing*, quoted above). Oates thus shows that during approximately the same historical period and in the same place (Upstate New York), mothers made different choices. The belief in limited opportunities is more evident in Oates's middle-class female characters than in those who aspire to become middle-class (and eventually succeed). Following David Riesman, the goal-oriented natures of Rebecca Schwart and Clara Walpole suggest that these women were the "self-trained children" of their time. They can be seen as inner-directed personalities, focused on social mobility and achieving inner goals.⁵²

For some mothers, such as Corinne Mulvaney and Gwen Eaton, religion plays a critical role in their understanding of their position in life. Oates's portrayal of Corinne suggests that this woman's free will and independence have been deformed by religion. Her indecisiveness is supported and encouraged by her church; and Christ's story provides meaning for her daughter Marianne's suffering, and justifies her exile. Jesus sacrificed himself for the redemption of others, just as Corinne sacrifices herself and her daughter in order to save their husband and father, Michael Mulvaney. Marianne does not turn out to be Michael's savior, however, and he dies. The other members of the family are scattered across America, and do not see one another for many years. Marianne, unlike Jesus Christ, falls apart; she becomes an impersonal being, like many of Oates's young female characters, and has to be saved herself. In Oates's narrative, the function of comfort is also dubious. The ready-made biblical answers that are meant to comfort a person facing a difficult situation – "*God sends us sorrow sometimes to strengthen us*"⁵³ – serve to veil the bleeding wound and encourage passivity. Christianity forms a protective shield, allowing Corinne and Marianne to avoid confrontation with the outside world. On the one hand, prayer numbs the mind, encourages forgiveness and provides a distraction. On the other, it reinforces Marianne's feelings of guilt and her own sense of having sinned.

Christopher Lasch believes that "submission to God makes people less submissive in everyday life. It makes them less fearful but also less bitter and resentful, less inclined to make excuses for themselves."⁵⁴ Oates, however, makes the point that religion is responsible for passivity, and for unconditional acceptance of blame and responsibility, not only for one's own actions, but also for the actions of others. Religion fills the emotional gap that is left when one is rejected by one's friends, neighbors, or family. Traumatized teenagers are the most sensitive of Oates's characters to religion, and to the direct interpretation and application of biblical aphorisms. In *Blonde* (2000),

Norma Jeane, whose mother is schizophrenic and who lives in an orphanage, quickly “takes the Kingdom of God”⁵⁵ into her heart. She, like Marianne, “tests” her faith by torturing herself: she refuses to take aspirin for headaches, for example, and hopes that God will grant a halt to her budding physical development. The church, of course, rushes to help these teenagers, hoping to manipulate them into worship. As such, the church offers these young women an “opportunity” – an approach that has a bewildering effect on rational people like Clara Walpole. In the following passage, two Methodist ladies have lured Clara into a church for the first time in her life:

It was all so strange. Something was happening all around her. In the air around her things seemed to be moving, invisibly bumping against her; was that why everyone was sobbing, out of terror? Why else would you sob if you weren’t hurt, except out of terror at being hurt in the future? ...
She understood something then: that these people had done something bad, something wrong, and that they would never get over it.⁵⁶

The life lived by Clara’s family, however – seasonal workers with no permanent place of residence, no school for the children, and no social guarantees – is worlds apart from middle class towns. The Methodist ladies cannot comprehend what it is to live on a seasonal workers’ camp. The church is not able to bring these two worlds together without reconciling their most urgent social differences, nor does it try to do so. Oates herself believes that the church is “primarily interested in consolidating power...The churches, particularly the Catholic Church, are patriarchal organizations that have been invested with the power for the sake of people in power, who happen to be men. It breeds corruption.”⁵⁷

Some scholars, however, suggest that religion and patriarchy do not necessarily have to restrict individuals’ lives. Daniel Bellah⁵⁸ claims that many “old” forms of family life continue to exist; some biblical and republican⁵⁹ traditions are still very much alive, and the individuals involved are happy and fulfilled in their acceptance of patriarchy. Bellah’s argument is that changes in society occur gradually, and different forms of social life and character types can exist synchronically. In Oates’s novels, however, the patriarchal mode of life suffocates the individual. Both Corinne Mulvaney and Gwen Eaton are limited by the cult of domesticity.

Andrew Dunar indicates that in the 1950s, the whole of social organization was attuned to supporting the cult of domesticity. He quotes and comments on a speech made by presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson at Smith College in 1955. Stevenson

...urged [women college graduates] to accept their place at home. 'Once they read Baudelaire,' he began, 'Now it is the *Consumer's Guide*. Once they wrote poetry. Now it's the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished.' He acknowledged their sense of 'closing horizons and lost opportunities,' but encouraged to make home where values of Western society could flourish.⁶⁰

The media, women's magazines, television serials, books and cartoons all encouraged adherence to family values, and promoted the idea that women should stay at home. Dunar shows how the 1950s bestseller, Dr. Benjamin Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, made an immense contribution to the cult of domesticity. Dr. Spock promoted "a social ethic that demanded that women abandon their own interests, jobs, and hobbies for the sake of their children."⁶¹ Betty Friedan, meanwhile, one of the initiators of the second wave of feminism, upon her return to Smith College (where she herself had studied), noticed that

the one lesson a girl could hardly avoid learning if she went to college between 1945 and 1960, was *not* to get interested, seriously interested, in anything besides getting married and having children, if she wanted to be normal, happy, adjusted, feminine, have a successful husband, successful children, and a normal feminine adjusted, successful sex life.⁶²

Oates's Corinne Mulvaney quits her studies in order to get married. Being educated and intelligent, meanwhile, makes Ariah Littrell from *The Falls* an unpopular candidate for marriage. In the first pages of *The Falls*, Oates portrays Ariah as a woman desperate to marry, just so that she can fit in:

Twenty-nine was nearing the precipice, the edge of oblivion: thirty. Ariah scorned such conventional thinking and yet the nether years of her twenties, past median twenty-five, when

everyone she knew or knew of was getting engaged, getting married, having babies, had been dismaying, nightmarish. *Dear God send someone to me. Let my life begin. I beg you!* There were times, shameful to admit, when Aria Littrell, an accomplished pianist, singer, music teacher, would have gladly exchanged her soul for an engagement ring, it was that simple. The man himself was a secondary matter.⁶³

Oates employs a similar motif in *Blonde*. Elsie Pirig, Norma Jeane's foster mother, has a very clear view of the female predicament: "*It's a man's world and to survive a woman must betray her own kind.*"⁶⁴ Just like Corinne, who must side with her husband and banish her daughter in order to survive, Elsie is convinced that she has to marry off 16-year-old Norma Jeane in order to save her family. Norma Jeane becomes a threat when Elsie's husband, Warren Pirig, starts to show an interest in her. Elsie is one of Oates's realistic female characters, capable of making a sober assessment of a situation while at the same time resenting it: "*it's a man's world and what the hell can a woman who's a realist do about that?*"⁶⁵ She knows that Norma Jeane is right to want to finish high school and to find herself a profession. Nevertheless, Elsie chooses to give her away: "*It's going to happen to you sooner or later, Norma Jeane. So better sooner. With this terrible war started, and young men joining up to fight, you'd better grab a husband while there are guys available and still in one piece.*"⁶⁶

A husband's meaning is equal to that of life and survival, irrespective of a woman's social class or status. The middle-class women in *Wonderland*, *Do With Me What You Will*, and *The Falls*, although possessing more material advantages, are faced with no better option in this respect than the working-class Loretta in *them*, or Clara in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*: "*There had been nothing else in the world for them, nothing except to give themselves to men, some man, and to hope afterwards that it had not been a mistake. But how could it be a mistake? There was no other choice.*"⁶⁷

The life of a woman lies in a man's hands and is shaped by him, just as in a 1950s Hollywood film, the script is written by a male writer, and transformed into a film by a male producer. In *Blonde*, Oates depicts an (female) actress who is searching for her role in life. She is finally able to achieve her ambitions by turning herself into a passive object, a sleepwalker. It is only by being reactive, not active, that she is granted a chance to survive. In the process of wrestling to define her film character, Angela, Norma Jeane makes a sad discovery: if you are not sacrificed, you have to sacrifice yourself;

without sacrifice, survival is impossible. In a man's world, you have to adjust yourself and be what men want you to be, and be called what men want you to be called; not Norma Jeane, but Marilyn Monroe:

In the film story, Angela is undefined. Shrewdly Norma Jeane perceived the girl to be Uncle Leon's fantasy. (And the fantasy of the moviemakers, who were male.) In the beautiful blank blond Angela, innocence and vanity are identical. There is no true motivation to her character except childlike self-interest. She initiates no scenes, no dramatic exchanges. She is purely reactive, not active. She speaks lines like an amateur actress, groping and improvising, and taking her cues from 'Uncle Leon.' By herself she does not exist. No woman in *The Asphalt Jungle* exists except by the way of men. Angela is passive as a pool of water in which others see their reflections, but she does not herself 'see.' It is no accident that the first time Angela is seen, she lies asleep on a sofa in a twisted position and we see her through her elder lover's possessive eyes. *Oh! I must have fallen asleep.* Yet awake, eyes widened in a perpetual wonder, Angela is a sleepwalker.⁶⁸

According to Bellah, the ideology of the "women's sphere"⁶⁹ survives in modern America, despite being severely criticized. Neither Elsie Pirig nor Corinne Mulvaney, nor so many other women and girls, imagine that their lives could take any other course than marriage. As such, marriage is part of a young woman's inheritance, the continuation of tradition supported by existing institutions. In more extreme cases, young women do not undergo (or do not complete) processes of individuation and separation from the parental family, and are simply not ready to create an atmosphere of "love and happiness" in a family.

Oates examines similar themes and situations in the 1970s novel, *Wonderland*. Helene Cady is brought up as an extension of her father's will, and as his property. She is incapable of asserting her individuality, and cannot function as a complete human being. Dissatisfied with her life and with herself, and fearing her own body, Helene believes that she must be completed by a man – her husband – through submission to his will; and later, when this fails, through pregnancy. Helene is also unable to break free from her father's influence; she accepts his checks and calls him "obediently," "as if she wanted nothing more than to leap back into his life."⁷⁰ Being so inse-

cure, Helene becomes invisible to both her father and her husband, so that they seem “to have no real consciousness of her except as a point of contact, an object, a beloved object.”⁷¹ Her daughter, Shelly, dares not look too closely at her mother’s face, for fear of seeing the sadness masking her individuality: “her face smooth and hollowed out as if with a surgical instrument, nothing but slopes in the skin for eyes and nose and mouth, indentations that are thoughtful and shadowed, valleys in a pale bloodless face.”⁷² Helene is an educated woman, but her work is overshadowed by that of her father and her husband. Her humanistic views on experiments involving brains, and her indignation at the idea that a superior brain should be preserved, are not taken seriously – “she is nervous. It’s her condition”⁷³ (she is pregnant). In a world dominated by strong male personalities, who seek power not only over their families but also over the ill, over disease, and over nature itself, it is very difficult for Helene to avoid becoming a puppet, or an object to be consumed:

She had married him but she didn’t know him. She had thought that marriage would be the beginning of her life; she had had a long life as a daughter, a famous man’s daughter, and she had been eager to begin her real life. She would be a woman, womanly and fulfilled. A wife. But this had not come about... And then, puzzled, she had believed that the birth of her first child would fulfill her. So much apprehension and pain and joy... But the birth had left her exhausted and at a distance from herself, from her own body. Her baby had overwhelmed her. She was ashamed of herself and it occurred to her that she must have another baby, another baby to make her normal, a real woman. But after the second baby nothing was different. She felt a final, terrible certainty about her strangeness: she would never become a real woman. She was being destroyed by her husband, she thought, annihilated by him. He could not imagine her, had not the time to imagine her existence, and so he was destroying her.⁷⁴

In the character of Mary Pedersen in *Wonderland*, Oates depicts a woman who is unable to free herself from the clutches of her monstrous husband, a man who is consuming not only his wife, but also his children. Mary’s obese and “strangely lifeless” body fulfills the function of a suit of armor, protecting the sensitive soul within. Mary is exposed to various kinds of mental and

physical abuse, from her husband's domination over every aspect of her life, to the most degrading sadistic punishments. Mary's patience is limited, but her repeated attempts to leave her husband fail; her conditioned mind obeys its "trainer," and she has nowhere to go. She understands that her situation is not optimal, and that her children are not normal (they are monsters, like their father). The little freedom that she is allowed – choosing the menu for the family, and working in the garden – is clearly not enough for any individual.

Mary and Helene are both married to men who wanted to maintain relationships with their fathers-in-law, and profit from them. From their husbands' perspectives, these women are luxurious commodities: a means of being closer to someone with whom they had been fascinated, or whose name and money removed obstacles to success and power. Yet, Mary is not as invisible to her father as Helene is to hers. She has a real voice in the novel; she tells her story to Jessie, her adopted son, and she protests against her position (although only summoning up her courage when under the influence of alcohol). While Mary's father's will suggests that he had been on Mary's side, this does not help Mary because she no longer belongs to him; she is the property of Dr. Pedersen. Moreover, looking outside the family for help is considered to be a breach of norms of respectability.

Writing on Oates's novels, Brenda Daly raises the question: "Why would middle-class women, those wealthy enough to attend college and imagine themselves as writers, remain mute instruments of the paternal voice and will, incapable of asserting their own desires?"⁷⁵ She thinks that the options open to these women remain invisible, obscured by social code, social mores, and a traditional value system that restricts a woman's freedom and confines her to the "woman's sphere," in Bellah's terms. A daughter who has learned to follow her "mute" mother's example is unable to reject the latter's habits and morals. The mother's situation in the paternal family defines, to a certain degree, the daughter's position in her own family. Daly insists that "what daughters need, [...] is a truly democratic society in which mothers have equal power not only within the family but beyond it. Tragically, as long as the family reproduces gender hierarchies, social injustice will continue."⁷⁶

Liberated Wives and Mothers

As I have shown, Corinne Mulvaney and Gwen Eaton, as well as Helene Cady and Mary Pederson from an earlier narrative, fully accept traditional family values and do not venture to imagine their lives without husbands. Corinne sacrifices her own well-being and that of her daughter in order to save her husband. Gwen Eaton, meanwhile, suppresses her individuality in

order to appear to be the perfect housewife, caring mother and locally-involved woman. In *The Falls*, however, Oates examines the options that are open to a woman who does not fit the image of a submissive housewife. For the 1950s, at least, Ariah Littrell is an “emancipated” woman. She refuses to live with her allegedly unfaithful husband, Dirk Burnaby, and after his death, she refuses to accept the life insurance money, even though this means giving up all comfort and moving to a working-class neighborhood. Unlike Gwen Eaton, Ariah guards her independence; she shuns her in-laws, and carefully manages her relationship with her own parents: “Chandler and Royall [Ariah’s sons] need grandparents, and these are devoted grandparents. So I think we should continue to see them, for the boys’ sake,”⁷⁷ she explains to her husband. In short, she is “intelligent, bookish, high-strung... inclined to impatience and exasperation.”⁷⁸ Ariah jokes ironically that “all that was good in her, sentimental and soft-hearted, was embodied in Zarjo,”⁷⁹ Ariah’s dog. For sure, Ariah does not have the character traits that are appreciated in the traditional ideal of motherhood.

Yet, the novel briefly describes a much greater challenge to traditional 1950s family values than that of Ariah’s fears of dependence and her eccentricity: that of homosexuality. *The Falls* contains a short episode in which Oates describes a love relationship between two men, which takes the form of a situational sketch rather than a well-developed affair. The Presbyterian minister Gilbert Erskin, Ariah’s first husband, while on his way to commit suicide by jumping into the Niagara Falls, reflects on his relationship with his friend Douglas, whom he has known since the seminary. He thinks, “*I can’t love any woman, God help me, I’ve tried. I can only love you.*”⁸⁰ The reader is led to believe that Gilbert Erskin married Ariah Littrell in the hope that she would become his social, perhaps intellectual, but not sexual, partner, whom “*he would come to love... in time.*”⁸¹ However, on their wedding night, the cold and virginal spinster Ariah unexpectedly turns into a sexually aroused woman – an experience so traumatic for Gilbert that he commits suicide. Without being too explicit, even for 1950s standards, Oates manages to tell the story in such a way that the reader is aware of what is happening, while Gilbert himself does not really perceive the impact of his sexual orientation, and “Ariah can only feel guilt, shame, and humiliation as the bride of a suicide.”⁸² The characters are neither aware of the concept of homosexuality, nor possess the vocabulary to speak about it. As Andrew Dunar explains, in the 1950s, members of both lesbian and gay organizations were closely monitored by the FBI, and “severe sanctions against homosexuality kept the public expression of the movement to a low murmur.”⁸³

The narrative of *The Falls* develops into a family saga, told from the points of view of Ariah, her second husband Dirk Burnaby, and their children: Chandler, Royall and Juliet. Over a period of almost three decades, Ariah develops from being an inexperienced spinster into a matriarch who tries to control everyone around her. Soon after her second marriage, which takes place within a month of the first, Ariah starts to dominate and control, redefining not only her relationships with her own parents and the outer world, but also those with her husband, and later, her children. For instance, she insists that her son Royall should not attend college, because this would only mean “over-reaching. Ambition. What does it get a man, it gets him dead.”⁸⁴ When Royall thinks of marrying, Ariah demands that the newlyweds live in her house: “Ariah would move out of her upstairs bedroom, and redecorate it for them.”⁸⁵ What she cannot achieve by manipulation, she attempts to achieve by “spectacular flare-ups of temper”⁸⁶ and physical violence.⁸⁷ Thus the chapter telling the children’s stories is symbolically called “Hostages.”

In a sense, Ariah is herself also a hostage. She views her relationships and friendships through the prism of fears and obsessions that was created by her first husband’s suicide; upon discovering the suicide note, Ariah thought she was “damned.”⁸⁸ Later, she feels insecure: “Why had she wanted another baby so badly, when she was too old? When her husband might leave her at any time?”⁸⁹ She fears that relationships are only temporary, and tries to control her world in order to avoid disappointment and accidents: “She’d become the most fiercely protective of mothers.”⁹⁰ In an interview, Oates explains Ariah’s behavior as follows:

She wanted her children to stay right in that house so that nothing will happen. She doesn’t want her daughter to be hurt. She wants her daughter to be right in that house in the next room. She wants her sons to be right there. And there are some women that feel that way. And actually, sometimes they are right. That’s the irony.⁹¹

On the one hand, Ariah is an assertive and strong woman who knows what she wants. On the other, she undermines her independence by confining herself to the household. She shuns social engagements, and detests the fact that her husband, Dirk Burnaby, takes a defense case on behalf of victims of industrial pollution in Love Canal, even though she knows nothing about it: “Dirk told Ariah nothing of Love Canal; for he knew she wanted to hear nothing of his deepest, most profound life that excluded her and her child-

ren.”⁹² She also chooses to avoid taking any responsibility for financial or organizational matters: “Since the marriage she hadn’t paid a single bill, never so much as opened letters containing bills, anything from County of Niagara, State of New York, or the US Federal Government she pushed away from her with a shudder...”⁹³ While her desire to continue to give piano lessons and to seek financial independence suggests that she is a progressive liberated woman, her conservative side and the narrowness of her world is revealed by her sole focus on herself and her family:

Days, Ariah avoided answering the phone. She sorted mail into neat piles on the vestibule table, but frequently put off opening her own mail, rare as it was. ... She never watched TV news or read the front pages of the newspapers where disturbing news might be printed. Quickly she turned to features, to women’s pages, entertainment, comics.⁹⁴

Of anything in the book, the Falls have the greatest impact on Ariah’s life. Oates has made this natural phenomenon the book’s main character, presiding over everyone’s lives. While providing local people with a source of income, most importantly, the Falls have mystical power over people’s minds. As Sharon Dean has observed, in *The Falls*, Oates brings together the themes of the physical beauty of the nature, environmental problems, tourism, as well as an interest in past and present myths, and the ability of language to define these realities.⁹⁵ The Falls, then, become a symbolic meeting point for the social and the mythical, the physical and sublime. Ariah’s life is affected by all of these dimensions.

In the first place, Ariah fears the Falls’ mythical powers, as she is both aware and afraid of her own subconscious powers. Oates opens the narrative with a few citations from allegedly historical sources that describe Niagara Falls as a “Suicide’s Paradise.”⁹⁶ If one stands and stares into the rapids for a while, the attraction of the water becomes so great that “even the will of the active, robust man in the prime of life [becomes] temporary invalid.”⁹⁷ The victim will then throw himself into the water, which is exactly what Ariah’s first husband did. Her second husband also dies in the Falls, forced off the road by his adversaries. Ariah is thus confronted with legends that reiterate her own life-story; indeed, she herself becomes a legend, “The Widow-Bride of The Falls,”⁹⁸ after her husband’s suicide. So her “skin creeps”⁹⁹ when her son tells her that Onigara Indians would sacrifice a 12-year-old girl by putting her in a canoe and releasing her. “The girl then was the bride of the

Thunder God who lived in the Falls.”¹⁰⁰ Chandler explains, “That’s why there are ghosts in The Falls. In the mist you can see them sometimes. That’s why people want to throw themselves into The Falls, it’s the Thunder God. He’s Hungry.”¹⁰¹ Oates mixes real events that occurred at the Falls with the products of human imagination, creating a myth about the supernatural powers of nature.

Being a rational and intelligent woman, Ariah both fears and is attracted to Niagara Falls. She first visits the place on her honeymoon; later, she stays there to make her living, despite the losses she has experienced there. Her life is defined by her proximity to the site. For instance, she asks her husband to drive their week-old son to see the Falls, and when she hears from her sister-in-law that her husband, Dirk Burnaby, is involved with another woman, Ariah’s physical reactions synchronize with the Falls: “The mist seemed to be spreading. Ariah rubbed at her eyes. Maybe she was going blind? A roaring in her ears too, like distant falling water.”¹⁰² The narrative suggests a deep connection between Ariah and the Falls. While Ariah manages to steer away from becoming an exemplary housewife, she is not able to avoid becoming entrapped in the Falls’ power.

Oates sets out yet another path to motherhood in the character of Rebecca Schwart in *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*. As I mentioned earlier, Rebecca’s portrayal echoes that of Clara Walpole in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*. Like Clara, Rebecca has an Eden County-like, lower-class background, and ends up in the affluent middle classes. She is the daughter of German emigrants, Jacob and Anna Schwart, who fled as refugees from Nazi Germany. Jacob holds the position of “caretaker of the cemetery, the gravedigger,”¹⁰³ and lives in a cottage at the cemetery. Not only is the cottage in a state of bad repair, but the family is also constantly surrounded by a smell of “decomposing organic matter,”¹⁰⁴ and they drink “grave water.”¹⁰⁵ A mathematics teacher in the Old World, Jacob Schwart is now

a broken man, a coward. He had been unmanned. The rats have devoured his conscience, too. He’d had to fight to save himself and his young family, he’d betrayed a number of his relatives who had trusted him, and Anna’s as well; he might have done worse if he’d had an opportunity.¹⁰⁶

Rebecca’s deprived childhood ends when her father, unable to cope with his psychological problems and with economic and social pressures, kills a visitor to the graveyard, then kills his own wife, and finally himself. He also

considers killing Rebecca, but is unable to do so. By that time, her brothers have already fled the county. Like Clara Walpole, Rebecca has to find out how to survive on her own. Her strategy is to reinvent herself, adapt to her new circumstances, and to use and manipulate others to achieve her goals. “Male violence distorts and reshapes her life, as she spends most of the novel on the run: away from the violent legacy of her father; away from the timorous and religious teacher who takes her in; away from her friends and into the arms of a hulking, hot-tempered maniac,”¹⁰⁷ Nile Tignor, her first husband. After this, she runs away again, this time to save her own life and that of her son, Niley. Rebecca adopts a new name, Hazel Jones, and changes her son’s name to Zacharias. After a few stops in different towns, she settles down, first in Malin Head Bay, and then in Buffalo. Just as she had manipulated people into forging birth certificates for her and her son, Hazel Jones then manages to win Chet Gallagher’s heart, and marries her way into a comfortable life.

Although Rebecca changes her name to Hazel Jones, in her heart, she preserves her former identity. Rebecca is haunted by memories of her early life in Milburn, but she manages to hold them at bay. At one point, though, this suppressed identity reaches a crescendo of emotion: while listening to her grown-up son play Beethoven’s “Apassionata” Sonata, Rebecca sees her family, “Blurred with distance as with time, their faces hovered at the rear of the concert hall. The Schwarts!”¹⁰⁸ In this episode, Rebecca stops running. In her mind, she establishes the truth that the Schwarts had failed as parents, and she feels liberated: “She was no one’s daughter now. And she would be no one’s mother. All that was over.”¹⁰⁹

She resolves to find her cousin Freyda Morgenstern, who was assumed dead, and now emerges as a holocaust survivor and an anthropologist. The narrative ends with the two cousins exchanging letters. This relationship offers Hazel Jones an opportunity to become Rebecca again and to write about her past, although the fact that she does not reveal her new name, “Hazel Jones,” to her cousin suggests the impossibility of reconciling the two identities. Unlike in *Mother, Missing*, the secrets remain undisclosed: the name “Schwart” is not real, but Rebecca does not know the real one; Niley/Zacharias does not know his father’s name, nor about his mother’s background; and Rebecca’s husband, Chet Gallagher, is not aware of Rebecca’s true identity. “Secrets! In the tight bundle inside her rib cage in the place where her heart had been. So many secrets, sometimes she couldn’t get her breath.”¹¹⁰ In this respect, Oates is drawing on her own experience: “Rebec-

ca's story is based very closely on the life of her own grandmother – a life which she was at pains to conceal while she was alive.”¹¹¹ Oates says,

I had this skeletal outline of my family history, but that was all I had – no one would ever talk about. [sic] I never saw a photograph of my grandfather; he was never discussed, and of course my grandmother's parents were never talked about either. My family history was filled with pockets of silence. I had to do a lot of imagining.¹¹²

Oates's portrayal of Rebecca's reinvention as “Hazel” is deeply rooted in the American tradition of renewal, but the image that Oates paints of 1950s motherhood is clearly at odds with traditional American family values. In the first place, being the daughter of immigrants, Rebecca is haunted by her roots and by her experience of “not belonging” in America (she was born on the ship): “You are born here, they will not hurt you,” her father tells her.¹¹³ Second, contrary to the acclaimed “sense of security postwar couples experienced,”¹¹⁴ Rebecca cannot find a safe place, neither for herself nor for her son. All of the highly-lauded options – “government programs [that] provided [young couples] with substantial assistance in housing, education, and jobs”¹¹⁵ – are unavailable in fictional Upstate New York. Thus the family, which is usually thought of as a place to shelter from the bad world outside, turns into a place of horror. Despite all the difficulties that Oates makes her “fictional grandmother” endure, resilience of character and strength win in the end, and Rebecca/Hazel accomplishes her American Dream.

What Gwen Eaton, Corinne Mulvaney, Ariah Burnaby and Rebecca Schwart have in common are resilient personalities, and steady beliefs and value systems. Their portrayals remind us of the characteristics of the ‘inner directed’¹¹⁶ person, as described by Riesman. Such a person has internalized the principles of family behavior, and is “capable of great stability... even when the reinforcement of social approval is not available.”¹¹⁷ He or she “may refuse to adapt because of their moral disapproval of what the signals convey.”¹¹⁸ The character that has been formed in the family does not change, but when necessary, such a person “can flexibly adapt his behavior precisely because he need not change his character. He can separate the two by virtue of the fact that he is an individual with an historically new level of self-awareness.”¹¹⁹ Despite their mistakes and unwise choices, these women are reliable, and ultimately win the respect of their children.

Charlotte and Betsy: Contemporary Women

Oates examines yet another dimension of motherhood in two recent satiric parodies, *What I Lived For* (1994) and *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008). The mothers presented – Charlotte Drummond and Betsey Rampike, respectively – offer extreme examples of other-directed American personalities, to use Riesman’s terminology. Riesman defines such people as adaptable and manipulative. In the world of the other-directed person, “social mobility...continues to exist. But it depends less on what one is and what one does than on what others think of one – and how competent one is in manipulating others and being oneself manipulated.”¹²⁰ Common characteristics of other-directed people include having shifting goals in life, and adjusting to the “actions and wishes of the others”¹²¹ – these being their friends, the mass media, and those who matter. In this section, I focus on contemporary mothers, while a more detailed analysis of *What I Lived For* and its parodic aspects will be presented in chapters two and five, and the style of *My Sister, My Love* will be discussed in chapter five.

In *What I Lived For* – a novel that was written two years prior to *We Were The Mulvanneys* – Oates explores what becomes of an individual when he or she does not possess a sense direction, or fails to pursue particular goals in life. Through the character of Charlotte, and her relationships with her ex-husband and daughter, Oates analyses the connections between failed motherhood and the other-directed personality type, something that Oates equates with narcissism. Christopher Lasch uses the term, “narcissist,” to denote a certain type of personality, as defined in the *Dictionary of Psychology*,¹²² that is related to cultural patterns such as “intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women.”¹²³ It is not just sociologists and psychologists who are concerned with this “new” type of personality. Susan Bordo suggests that the postmodern self demonstrates:

intoxication with individual choice and creative *jouissance*, delight with the piquancy of particularity, mistrust of pattern and seeming coherence, celebration of difference with an absence of critical perspective differentiating and weighting ‘differences’ and suspicion of the totalitarian nature of generalization along with a rush to protest difference from its homogenizing abuses.¹²⁴

Unlike most of Oates's novels, *What I Lived For* is told from the viewpoint of one person, Jerome Corcoran (Corky). As a result, Charlotte Drummond (Drummond being her maiden name) does not have her own voice, and is seen through her ex-husband Corky's eyes. This stylistic device creates distance between the character and the reader, allowing Oates to suggest that Charlotte is both isolated from the world by others, and indeed prefers such isolation. Corky's cynical comments reveal the vanity and meaninglessness of Charlotte's way of life. She is a caricature of the postmodern mother, a woman who does not want to be a mother at all. Charlotte lives in an almost fantasy world; she maintains few links with reality, and is protected by her rich father. She does not take anything seriously, does not feel responsible for anything, and is completely cocooned in her own world. Her inability to develop a genuine interest in others or in some occupation drives her to seek comfort in alcohol. Charlotte's misery arises from her narcissistic attitude to life: her tendency to see herself as a very important, responsible person; her insatiable need for attention and admiration; and her fascination with wealth. There is no consequence or continuity in her life, and her existence is scattered into fragments, like the television programs she watches: "I almost never watch anything more than three minutes now there's the remote control."¹²⁵ Married for the third time, Charlotte, in spite of committing adultery with her ex-husband, claims still to be looking for "real love" in a world of casual sexual contacts and short-term relationships.

The narrative's setting, its structure and the portrayal of its characters, suggest that *What I Lived For* is a parody of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The action of *What I Lived For* takes place during the Memorial Day long weekend (between 22 and 25 May, 1992). The protagonist, Corky (an allusion to the protagonist of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom), is traveling around Union City and its suburbs for business, and chasing his step-daughter, Thalia. Charlotte is mostly depicted in her huge villa, reminding us of Molly Bloom. Just as *Ulysses* holds up a mirror to Dublin and its inhabitants' relationships, so *What I Lived For* depicts the ways of the fictional Union City. One of James Joyce's purposes in writing *Ulysses* was to celebrate the greatness of ordinary life in the Dublin of his day, in contrast to the half-gods and military heroism of Ancient Greece. An ordinary man, Leopold Bloom has both virtues and flaws, while Corky Corcoran's flaws outnumber his virtues. While in *Ulysses*, the characters are interrelated in numerous ways, in *What I Lived For*, they are hardly connected at all. In Oates's take on the 1990s, relationships are an impossible luxury at a time when people are preoccupied with

themselves, with their seeming omnipotence, and with the archetypical heroes of modern times: cowboys, detectives and PR glamour girls.

While Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* is an ordinary, mundane woman, who is perfectly capable of dealing with her life and her lovers, Charlotte is stripped of both romance and rationality, her own personality merely being an extension of her father's. Like Penelope in *The Odyssey*, she is waiting for her ex-husband Corky – who is wandering (like Odysseus or Bloom) through Union City, overindulging in food, alcohol and sex (unlike Odysseus or Bloom) – to help her to deal with her daughter, Thalia. Incapable of conducting a relationship with her own daughter, Charlotte tries to reach Thalia through Corky, while at the same time stimulating Corky's incestuous desires.

Sad, alienated from both her daughter and her husband, and addicted to tranquilizers and alcohol, Charlotte is at the same time comical in her desperate attempts to boost her self-importance when interacting with Corky and the outside world. The incongruence between what she really is, and what she thinks she is, makes her a tragicomic character:

‘... It just makes her [Thalia] hard, these pure-hearted people are hard, they’re not human like the rest of us, *we* do the worrying, *we* take the responsibility. I’m so *exhausted* with being a mother to a girl who refuses to be a daughter! If only Thalia would get married... When I was twenty-five...’ Charlotte’s voice trails off, angry, bewildered.

Corky says gently, ‘hey: when you were twenty-five, you were married to “Tip.” You told me, you believed your life was over.’

‘What? That’s ridiculous. I never said that. At Thalia’s age I had a beautiful little girl, I’d accomplished *that*. No matter who the father was, no matter the mistakes I made, I had Thalia, I loved my girl, *that* was what I had.’¹²⁶

In another scene she confides to Corky, “A mother’s worst fear isn’t just that she will lose her child but she will lose herself, as a mother. She’ll wish she’d never given birth.”¹²⁷

Molly in *Ulysses* is an assertive individual. While Joyce grants Molly a long soliloquy, Charlotte mostly exists in Corky’s mind, thus reflecting the cultural stereotype that she embodies: a rich father’s vain, doll-like daughter, a plaything for a future husband. The part that Charlotte plays on the stage of an amateur theatre reflects her destiny in her life as a socialite: mistress to an

older man, an object to be decorated with expensive jewelry and ostentatious clothes. She is neither trusted to raise her daughter from her first marriage, nor to acquire the right kind of husband. Her father, Ross Drummond, repeatedly steps in to save her: after buying out her first “psychopath” husband, he marries her off to Corky in exchange for a career. When the marriage does not work out, Charlotte gets another husband. Her identity gradually dissolves during her marriages to Braunbeck, Corcoran and Pierson.

Charlotte is only allowed to speak and act in one episode, and even then, Corky’s cynical and resentful thoughts reduce her to merely being a bad actress. When she starts to cry, Charlotte cries with her “face stiff in this way she’s cultivated of crying without wrinkling her skin excessively,” or she cries “not so agitatedly she can’t gulp”¹²⁸ her wine. Charlotte disappears from the novel shortly after her meeting with Corky. Much of Charlotte’s character is a product of Corky’s imagination, drawing on his memories of their married life. Corky compares her with the other women he sees, his cynical remarks stripping off the last shreds of romanticism and any credibility that she might still have. This is in marked contrast to Bloom in *Ulysses*, who dreams about Molly and seeks her love. Both Charlotte and Molly are adulterous wives, but Molly, at the end of her soliloquy, says “yes” to her husband, Leopold Bloom, whereas Charlotte is rejected by Corky.

Oates earlier wrote about a similar subject in *Expensive People* (1968). In the suburbia depicted in this narrative, adultery is excusable, since the wives are assets and have promotional value. Subordinate wives are not required, and neither are wives seen primarily as mothers. A successful family is one that possesses good looks and glamour:

And you men, you would all like a Nada [mother and wife] of your own. If your income is above a certain level you’d need her to show it off, wouldn’t you? That pleasant, sandy-faced woman you married would fade into a living room’s beige walls if Nada walked into the room, not just because she was beautiful but because she had ... whatever it was certain women have, I don’t pretend to know. Your wife supposes herself chic, and salesladies flatter her, but Nada didn’t need anyone’s flattery. You’d rather have Nada, bitch that she was, and notice other men’s envious stares. The reality would be hell, but then the reality is always hell...¹²⁹

In *What I Lived For*, like in *Expensive People*, the characters yearn for relationships that, when they occur, are unstable and slippery. In Union City, such relationships are often replaced by fragmentary casual sexual contacts. Nada, the mother in *Expensive People*, in overestimating the importance of her love affairs and neglecting her son's needs, has a lot in common with Charlotte. Oates was thus as concerned with the notion of the fake, narcissistic mother in the 1990s as she had been in the 1960s. Charlotte's portrayal, in comparison with that of Nada, is more selectively narcissistic. Nada, despite being an elusive and selfish mother, is productive; she is a writer, while Charlotte leads a parasitical existence. Charlotte is the "next step" of Nada; a mother whose daughter rejects her, calls her a monster, and does not even try to establish a relationship with her (unlike Richard, Nada's son). The suburban children of the 1990s do not seek relationships with their parents; instead, they are fascinated by the ideal of individual freedom.

In *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008), Oates moves still deeper into the subject of narcissism; or rather, she dives straight into "Tabloid hell." In this narrative, Oates combines the world of neglected and exploited suburban children with a constant media presence. For the parents, "real" reality has ceased to be interesting, and has been replaced with the reality projected on huge television screens: "Daddy [Bix Rampike] had installed not one but two gigantic 'state-of-the art' TV screens...so that [he] could watch both at the same time, wielding remote controls in both hands."¹³⁰ The children are only really appealing when their photos are printed in tabloids. The parental attention deficit causes numerous disorders that, ironically, are interpreted by the children as marks of distinction: they boast to their "playmates" of having "RA (recovering anorexia),"¹³¹ "GCSS (Gifted Child Syndrome Sufferer), APM (Acute Premature Melancholia),"¹³² "PDD (Premature Depression Disorder) CAS (Chronic Anxiety Syndrome),"¹³³ and so on.

As I argue in chapter five of this study, *My Sister, My Love* is a spoof on *Expensive People* (1968). Both novels depict situations in which a psychologically traumatized son narrates the story of an affluent, suburban family. The narrator of *Expensive People*, Richard Everett, claims to have killed his mother, Nada, because he could not bear the prospect of her leaving him again. His parodic "self," Skyler Rampike, the narrator of *My Sister, My Love*, is ridden with guilt for his sister's death, until he discovers that his mother, Betsey, was responsible. Both novels explore relationships between parents and children in prosperous families, as seen from the perspective of

sons. In doing so, the parents in *My Sister, My Love* are grotesque versions of the parents in *Expensive People*.

Betsey Rampike is constructed from a number of negative stereotypes from the world of popular culture and tabloid newspapers. Betsey is not a “real” person, unlike the other mothers that have been discussed in this chapter. Her character fulfills a certain function in the novel, but lacks any psychological complexity or history. While Judd Mulvaney, the narrator of *We Were The Mulvaneys*, presents the reader with the complex and deep character of his mother, Corinne, including details from her childhood, her relationship with his father, and her beliefs and morals, Skyler seems to know very little about his mother. Some of the material in his memoir is taken from “her numerous interviews,”¹³⁴ but in comparison with Richard Everett, he knows little about his parents’ affairs. He learns about his parents’ divorce, for instance, from a television talk show. After his sister Bliss’s death, Betsey turns into a “TV Mummy,” since Skyler, who spends his life in boarding schools, only sees her on television. After Bliss’s death, Skyler’s mother largely loses interest in her son. For Betsey, motherhood only has meaning if you raise a prodigy; for this reason, Skyler, who is not fit to be an athlete, ceases to be interesting to her.

At first, Betsey Rampike is preoccupied with “launching” her daughter as a promising skater. After the girl’s death, she launches a career as a writer of therapeutic books. Betsey sets up a business around her daughter Bliss’s name, and her murder: “she’d inaugurated Heaven Scent Products in 1998 as a way of ‘helping to heal the festering wounds’ of her personal tragedy.”¹³⁵ This unique selling point helps Betsey to market a cosmetic kit, bubble bath, Christmas chocolates, perfumes, scarves, bracelets, and above all, “a Heaven Scent Bliss Rampike Doll: a startlingly lifelike replica of Bliss Rampike in miniature,”¹³⁶ which makes the story of Betsey’s perversity complete. Then Oates reveals the power of the media: how the death of a little girl can be exploited to benefit the American political agenda. Randy Riley, in his news talk show, congratulates Betsey on her new book and blames “secular progressive Democrats”¹³⁷ for paroling the criminal who had allegedly killed Bliss (although we later learn that Betsey herself had killed her). Bliss’s funeral and, later, Betsey’s funeral, become media events.

While Nada in *Expensive People* is obsessed with remaining commitment-free, Betsey is obsessed with fame and media attention. In order to achieve her ideal of freedom, Nada refuses to accept her identity. Only after her death does her son discover that she never belonged to a royal family, as she used to claim, and that her “father was neither mad man nor genius, but

just an ordinary, very ordinary, apologetic, slow man...”¹³⁸ Her real name was Nancy Romanow, and she had been born into a poor, Ukrainian immigrant family. Betsey’s family background, meanwhile, is never revealed; it is merely suggested that she comes from a lower-class family, and that her relations are not welcome at Bliss’s funeral. Betsey’s funeral is attended mainly by her television audience and fans.

Betsey and Nada exhibit a boundless desire to escape the ordinary, and to become objects of adoration at the cost of the physical and mental health of their own children. Their characters reveal Oates’s belief that as people, we are limited, and that we have to recognize our limits. Freedom for Nada is a necessary condition of life, like air, and in her self-actualized freedom, she ignores anyone else’s attempt to connect with her. Yet, by trying to transcend her limitations and become autonomous, she causes pain to others. Betsey’s narcissism and egocentrism, meanwhile, destroy the lives of her children. For Betsey, the fame and superficial attention resulting from her appearances on television are very important. Betsey does not have Nada’s dignity, but she does have her selfishness. As such, she is a much shallower version of Nada, a caricature of her. Betsey kills her daughter while trying to set up a scene that, in her imagination, will prevent her husband from leaving the family, and then she turns her misdeed into a commercial enterprise.

In Oates’s view, these mothers of affluent suburbia, in their search for self-actualization and fame, negate their basic responsibilities as parents. She suggests that for a woman, it is very difficult to find a balance between motherhood and personal freedom, between family and social engagement. If the options for inner-directed types, such as Corinne Mulvaney, are limited by the external environment and traditional values, so the mothers from the affluent suburbs are lost when making their choices, for they lack such a value system, not even one that they might rebel against. Betsey and Charlotte’s decisions are guided by the judgments of their peers, celebrated television personalities and talk shows. Gwen Eaton, Ariah Burnaby and Rebecca Schwart prioritize their children; Corinne Mulvaney puts her husband before her children; while for Nada, Charlotte and Betsey, children only become important when they are turned into prodigies.

Oates is clearly sympathetic to inner-directed types, to the women of Upstate New York. The mothers of Eden County have a certain dignity; they may sacrifice themselves unnecessarily, but in doing so, they preserve their integrity and self-respect, which are rooted in their values. Conspicuous consumption and the pursuit of fame are the least of their concerns. These portrayals suggest Oates’s preference for traditional value systems over

hedonism and preoccupation with the self. Indeed, her nostalgic vision comes close to Daniel Bell's view, that in the past:

there was a hierarchy of virtue in which the lower derived from the higher. But in modern consciousness, there is not a common being but a self, and the concern of this self is with its individual authenticity, its unique, irreducible character free of the contrivances and conventions, the masks and hypocrisies, the distortions of the self by society. This concern with the authentic self makes the motive and not the action – the impact on the self, not the moral consequence to society – the source of ethical and aesthetic judgments.¹³⁹

Oates reveals the Protestant work ethic's shortcomings, and how women have faced limited opportunities for self-development and individuality; but she also shows that self-actualization, although an attempt to rid oneself of hypocrisy, often leads to irresponsibility and the avoidance of relationships and commitments. In Oates's view, individualism belongs to adolescence; she believes that it is naive to think that we are not related to, and do not depend on, one another.¹⁴⁰ That is why the quest for freedom in the form of breaking human bonds does not deserve our appreciation; instead, the search for fulfilling relationships should be our ultimate goal, and one that is impossible to achieve in today's fragmented world. In short, what Oates embraces from the traditional way of life is memory, history and a sense of connectedness to previous generations.

The Importance of Memory and Tradition

All six narratives address, in one way or another, the relationship between being a fulfilled individual and memory. In *Mother Missing*, Nikki's rediscovery of her mother's (Gwen Eaton's) past brings her maturity and stability. She turns from being a funky and careless teenager into a mature young woman, who can make better choices in her partners. The sons of Ariah in *The Falls*, meanwhile, rediscover and restitute their father's past; and at the end of the novel, Ariah herself becomes open to the truth about her husband's death. After many years, Rebecca Schwart also establishes a link with her past through corresponding with her cousin, although she never tells her husband and son who she really is. Charlotte's portrait in *What I Lived For*, by contrast, has no associations with memory or the past; and Betsey's

“Heaven Scent Products” line in *My Sister, My Love* is a mockery of anything that is sacred about memory, the past or motherhood.

Oates deploys her most romanticized approach to memory in *We Were The Mulvanneys*. In this novel, the physical object of Alder Creek binds Judd, Corinne’s youngest son and the narrator of the novel, to his own past and childhood. This can be compared with the way in which Oates binds herself to the past in imaginative literature: at the beginning of the novel, she places an epigraph, a quotation from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, that emphasizes the importance of inheritance. Through numerous objects, hints and memories, Corinne, Marianne, Judd and Patrick are related to their past, or to the past of their country and of humanity as a whole. The following quotation, “For the Mulvanneys were a family in which everything that happened to them was precious and everything that was precious was stored in memory and everyone had a history,”¹⁴¹ rings true not only for the Mulvanneys, but for anyone who is concerned about the quality of his or her own life, and of their community.

For Corinne, memory is of the utmost importance: memory of one’s roots, one’s past, of the history of one’s country, or one’s family. Her son Judd remarks, “what is a family, after all, except memories? – haphazard and precious as the contents of a catchall drawer in the kitchen (called the ‘junk drawer’ in our household for good reason).”¹⁴² Oates’s critics call her a social chronicler, someone who produces written reports of events for future generations. Corinne uses things to access knowledge about the past – buying, restoring and selling antiques (or “junk”). She knows her own family story, and she values her own past: “they were dismantling the one-room schoolhouse in Ransomville, where I’d gone for eight grades. Imagine! ... So Sable and I drove over to the auction, and came away with so many wonderful things, we had to rent a U-Haul.”¹⁴³ Corinne and Sable’s choice in antiques reflects Oates’s own ideas about value: small, cheap things can be as valuable as expensive ones, especially when they are loaded with personal memories:

The more forlorn, left-behind kinds of things – a badly frayed silk fan in the shape of a butterfly, a heavy ceramic teapot on whose curved surface someone (children?) had mischievously scratched their initials, a packet of love letters from a World War I soldier to someone named Samantha, a soiled needle-point pillow in the shape of an elephant’s head, complete with drooping tusks – the more likely Corinne and Sable were drawn to them.¹⁴⁴

In her Introduction to *Snapshots: 20th Century Mother-Daughter Fiction*, Janet Berliner quotes Oates's comment on Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use": "Everyday Use will provoke you to wonder: What does it mean to memorialize the past? How can we best express our love for our heritage? Through isolating it, as art; or using it, as life?" Corinne does both; she first rescues, cleans and restores things, and only later puts them to use or displays them as art. She is primarily concerned with authenticity, with the "real," with proof of our existence once we are gone – the imprints we leave on the things we owned, or the things we made, our bequests. Resurrecting and writing about the past, Oates resembles Corinne, who is thrilled to discover some documents in an archive proving that, after 1850, High Point Farm had been an Underground Railroad "safe house" for escaped slaves. She writes a few pieces for the newspaper revealing these new facts to local people. Oates believes that relating to the past helps one to survive the hardships of the present; knowing one's past gives one confidence, and enables one to put current events in perspective and to survive. That is how Corinne copes with the tragic events that happen to her family, and how she finds the strength to recreate the mystical farm.

Oates uses the motif of a quilt to capture the value of memory, and its role in the transfer of values from one generation to another. In *You Must Remember This* (1987), Enid Stevick admires a quilt that had been made by her mother as a piece of art, and accepts it as part of her inheritance. Gwen Eaton in *Mother, Missing* "was sewing a quilt, for one of ... older Eaton cousins was having her first baby."¹⁴⁵ In *We Were The Mulvaneys*, Marianne, during the frequent flights and wanderings of her banishment, never leaves behind her "rag-quilt of dozens of squares, rectangles and oblongs, a rainbow of colors."¹⁴⁶ It serves as the memory of her life before the rape and gives her comfort, especially when her cat, Muffin, sits on top of it. It is also her material connection with the past, with her mother, even with the past of American women, with their courageous expression of political and social ideas through the art of quilting. Witney Chadwick, in *Women, Art, and Culture*, claims that quilting had functions beyond merely providing an opportunity for women to spend time together: "Women quickly used their skills in needlework to connect the domestic sphere and the public world of collective social action. Needlework cases bearing popular abolitionist slogans appeared and, by 1834, women were selling needlework items to raise money for the abolitionist cause."¹⁴⁷ Elaine Showalter argues that the art of quilting "has now become the symbol of American identity at the *fin de siècle*."¹⁴⁸ The quilts were made of "rags," scraps of old clothes, and cos-

tumes made for rituals; “rags” which had a strong emotional tie to family members. Like Walker, Elaine Showalter believes that the quilt is “an emblem of a universalist, interracial and intertextual tradition. It brings together elements from American and African-American history; from the farm and juke joint; from women’s spaces and men’s stories.”¹⁴⁹ In Oates’s novels, quilts first serve their “everyday” purpose – creating warmth and coziness in times of emotional distress (Enid lies under her quilt after an abortion) – and are then admired as art and as part of a cultural heritage.

Writing about where you are from is the way in which Oates memorializes her own roots: “Joyce’s obsessive desire to mythologize the vanished world of her childhood, so marked in her fiction of the late 1980s and the 1990s, had found its fullest expression in *We Were The Mulvanneys*. ”¹⁵⁰ The prototype of the Mulvaney farm is Oates’s own parents’ farm, and Corinne and Michael Mulvaney bear similarities to Carolina and Fred, Oates’s parents. Greg Johnson draws the following parallel: “like Fred [Oates’s father], Michael struggles to provide for his family and is known for his hot temper; like Carolina, [Oates’s mother] Corinne is a generous, energetic maternal figure who is the source of both physical and emotional nurture to her family. Also like Fred and Carolina, the Mulvaney parents move into a smaller, more modern ranch house after losing their farm.”¹⁵¹

A similar concern is voiced about modern society’s discourse on the individual’s disinterest in history, and the loss of continuity and memory. In the *Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch observes that, “we are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.”¹⁵² Oates’s concern about memory and roots is to be found in much of her fiction. In *We Were The Mulvanneys*, Oates is particularly interested in one aspect of this concern: women, as carriers of culture and preservers of bequests. The whole narrative, beginning with the quotation from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, is a celebration of memory and continuity, and the importance of heritage. Oates opens the novel by embracing good and evil, and happy and painful memories, in Judd’s words: “I believe in uttering the truth, even if it hurts. Particularly if it hurts.”¹⁵³ Her aspiration to tell the truth, to tell a story in the most objective way, recalls the demand for honesty in Bellah’s notion of the community of memory:

The stories that make up a tradition contain conceptions of character, of what a good person is like, and of the virtues that define such character. But the stories are not all exemplary, not

all about successes and achievements. A genuine community of memory will also tell painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes creates deeper identities than success, ... And if the community is completely honest, it will remember stories not only of suffering received but of suffering inflicted – dangerous memories, for they call the community to alter ancient evils. The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope.¹⁵⁴

It is important to tell the story of the Mulvaney family for the sake of the remaining Mulvanneys, and for future generations, the children of Marianne and Michael Jr., to enable them to make their own choices. Perhaps by knowing the complete account of the family story, about the “suffering received and suffering inflicted,” future generations will be able to reject personality-diminishing patriarchal traditions, the subordination of women, the suppression of individuality, and narcissism.

At the end of the narrative, Michael’s death releases the family, and allows them to be reunited. This, in turn, symbolizes the death of patriarchal cultural restrictions, and a new opportunity to explore individual interrelationships in more democratic surroundings. The reunion takes place on Independence Day, celebrating the American dream of being independent from England, and reminding the reader that political independence does not necessarily lead to *individual* liberation and democracy.

Corinne is the central figure in the novel’s epilogue. This version of Corinne perhaps “doesn’t want to be Mom right now,” and looks quite different from her previous incarnation as a girl from a Grimm’s fairy tale: her “hair turned silver, glittering like mica, and seemed even to have lost its kinky wave. She wore it plaited into a thick braid that swung between her shoulder blades. She’d become a striking woman after whom people glanced admiringly on the street as if wondering; *Who’s that?*”¹⁵⁵ Corinne is not alone; she has her female friends, lives with Sable Mills (her soul-mate), and is busy with her antiques. In one generation, the circle of life has made one full turn: Corinne has resurrected her Garden of Eden, which is now called “Alder Antiques Bargains & Beauty,” on the same Alder Creek that joins the present and the past in time and in space, both geographically and psychologically. Judd recollects, “The Alder Creek of my boyhood. That trickling splashing sound of water over rocks; a sound like voices in the distance, murmurous, questioning.”¹⁵⁶

The social gatherings depicted in the epilogues of *We Were The Mulvaneys* and *The Falls* evoke the reconciliation of families and the reestablishment of contact. *Mother, Missing*, meanwhile, ends with a daughter achieving maturity through her quest to learn about her mother's past. The epilogue of *The Gravediggers Daughter* also establishes a link with the past and with the family. Relationships between mothers and children are given opportunities to develop further. Oates is suggesting that by exploring women's histories and their role in the family, and by questioning cultural myths about the past and the present, one can discover a different truth from that commonly presented by families or communities. She fears that superficial interests, consumer culture, and our refusal to reinvestigate the past are instead creating the conditions for a regression to surrogate values.

As far as women and mothers are concerned, in her recent novels, Oates envisions more opportunities for the development of individuality and personal ambition than in earlier narratives. The motifs of Eden County that occur in these mostly middle-class novels serve to warn that "the basic reality...is economic,"¹⁵⁷ and that this fact alone plays a huge role in shaping people's vulnerability and defenselessness. The scenes of violence against women (and men) that occur in almost every novel are often related to economic deterioration and uncontrollable passions. It is also clear that when imagining a fulfilling life, Oates has a preference for rural landscapes, unity with nature, and a sense of connectedness to the past. Oates does not mean to imply that one can only become a fulfilled woman or mother in a rural setting; rather, she is proposing that alienation from nature and one's community, egocentrism, the pursuit of fame, and socialite lifestyles can destabilize any relationship, not only those between mothers and children. Although she devises happy endings for her "rural" novels, she pleads for change: for women to have more freedom in making decisions, and more freedom to change. Oates insists that the combination of having individual freedom, living an ordinary life, paying attention to family and to society, and feeling part of a larger historical process, can lead to personal fulfillment.

Chapter 2

Success and Failure in *What I Lived For* and *My Heart Laid Bare*

Having explored the worlds of the poor (*A Garden of Earthly Delights, them*) the rich (*Expensive People*), and the professions (lawyers in *Do With Me What You Will* and doctors in *Wonderland*), in *What I Lived For* (1994) and *My Heart Laid Bare* (1998), Oates immerses herself in corporate life, local politics, and con-artistry. In these narratives, Oates inevitably continues to develop themes and motifs from her previous works, including the role of memory and roots, social mobility, strength of character, and changes in American culture.

In his introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates*, Harold Bloom suggests that while Oates shows a lot of empathy for the poor, in *Expensive People*, she portrays the rich as “vicious.”¹ Oates’s tendency, in this respect, is even more marked in *What I Lived For*. In *Expensive People*, she had focused on inflated, narcissistic personalities and the destructive aspects of family life. In *What I Lived For*, she draws a broader picture of political, executive and personal life, presenting a “powerful indictment of American culture, especially in its superficial vulgarity, its confusion of love and money, and its preoccupations with sex, material possessions and social status.”² At the core of both novels – as in the later works, *Middle Age* and *My Sister, My Love* – lies the motif of the individual who has been corrupted by favorable economic circumstances. In her essays and interviews, Oates affirms that “the greatest realities are physical and economic; all subtleties of life come afterward.”³ When humans achieve economic security, however, she worries that affluence may lead to perversity. In her essay on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oates writes the following:

Wilde’s great theme is the Fall – the Fall of innocence and its consequences, the corruption of ‘natural’ life by a sudden irreversible consciousness (symbolized by Dorian’s infatuation with himself) – but this falling from grace is available only to those who have attained a certain degree of economic and intellectual freedom. Restlessness, ennui, the inability to apply

one's strength to anything – these are not merely symptoms of Dorian's perverse nature, but symptoms of a highly advanced and sophisticated civilization. So Dorian is a victim – not unlike Dostoyevsky's similarly emblematic Stavrogin, who drifts into a life of unimaginative vice because he is 'freed' of the earth and of the necessity to labor as ordinary men do.⁴

This passage also reflects Oates's concerns about the negative aspects of American upper-middle-class life. What Oates sees as typical characteristics of "a highly advanced and sophisticated civilization" are evident in her portrayals of the upper-middle classes in novels such as *What I Lived For*, *Middle Age*, *Cybele* and *Expensive People*. In Oates's view, these upper-middle-class individuals attain economic and intellectual freedom, become infatuated with the prospect of power and money, and, in the process, lose touch with the "earth." Their dissatisfaction with the present results in restlessness, and their minds become clouded with boredom, emptiness and eventually anxiety, ultimately leading them to destruction, instead of redemption. Although Oates is often critical of rigid traditionalism and the restriction of individual liberties, in the midst of such abundance and easy living, she seems to long for such traditional values as hard "work, sobriety, frugality [and] sexual restraint,"⁵ those fundamental building blocks of Protestant ethics and the Puritan temper.

According to Daniel Bell, in the course of the 20th century, the struggle between "tradition and modernity"⁶ led to the disappearance of Protestant ethics and the Puritan temper. As a result, capitalism was left with "no moral or transcendental ethic."⁷ In the 1960s, a counter-culture emerged that "sought to take the preachments of personal freedom, extreme experience... and sexual experimentation to a point in *life-style* that the liberal mentality – which would approve of such ideas in art and imagination – is not prepared to go."⁸ As I show in chapter one and chapter three of this study, Oates's portrayals of small-town and rural America between the 1950s and the 1990s suggest that traditional understandings of morality were indeed preserved during this time. Yet, in her narratives, Oates also struggles to find a balance between traditions and personal freedom, neither of which can serve as an absolute goal in life. Bell finds a similar contradiction in corporations' attitudes towards people's lifestyles:

The business corporation wants an individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification – to be, in the

crude sense, an organization man. And yet, in its products and its advertisements, the corporation promotes pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go. One is to be ‘straight’ by day and a ‘swinger’ by night.⁹

In Oates’s portrayal, corporate America in *What I Lived For* is engaged in “swinging,” gambling, and “making a fast buck”. In private, though, people express a longing for more traditional lifestyles that hark back to their ancestral culture, a world that disapproved of such extravagance. Oates’s characters dream of peace, but do not know how to find it. This longing for the past and traditional values does not mean that Oates wishes to restore the past, or return to a society governed by small-town Protestant morality. Nevertheless, she finds the excessive lightheartedness of wealthy lifestyles difficult to accept. Christopher Lasch’s observations about late-20th century American society support Oates’s fears: “people today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.”¹⁰

Yet, in Oates’s vision of corporate America, the fundamental drive to succeed survives. As in *Blonde*, the biggest motivation for success is the fear of failure; the fear of sliding back into the lower classes, of having to return to the neighborhood where one came from. According to sociologists, the desire to succeed and to demonstrate success to others is central to middle-class identity, and closely related to the American Dream. According to Kenneth Jackson, for Americans, being successful primarily means “getting ahead” in six areas, the “fundamental characteristics of American society:”¹¹ namely, conspicuous consumption, (owning an) automobile, upward mobility, the work-leisure balance, racial and economic exclusiveness and the nuclear family. Together, these “areas” define the American suburban middle-class lifestyle. Daniel Yankelovich remarks that increasing numbers of Americans are more concerned about self-fulfillment than they are about traditional values for a simple reason: they believe that “the old giving/getting compact needlessly restricts the individual while advancing the power of large organizations … who use the power to enhance their own interests at the expense of the public.”¹² However, a large majority of American men and women, as Yankelovich’s statistical data suggest (84% and 77% respectively in 1976), would work for pay even if they didn’t need to.¹³ In the 1970s, a large majority also continued to believe in the “giving-getting compact,”¹⁴ and in traditional middle-class values such as respectability, upward mobility,

family well-being, house and car ownership, living in a nice neighborhood, and sacrificing self-expression for the sake of the family or gaining an education. In his book, Yankelovich suggests that for most Americans, success means “the intactness and well-being of the family, enough money to provide some of the luxuries of life as well as security; and hankering after respectability and acceptance.”¹⁵

In *What I Lived For*, Oates suggests that these “characteristics” continue to be applicable, but have become deformed. In doing so, she is also asserting that, to a certain extent, they are valuable and worthy of investigation, and should be adjusted to the demands of each new generation. She leaves us in no doubt as to the magnitude of the change experienced by her female characters, as a result of their ascendance to the middle classes and their acceptance of middle-class values. As the novels discussed in chapter one suggest, improving one’s economic circumstances can create many new opportunities for self-fulfillment. On the other hand, for the post-war generation, a moral code that demanded respectability and the preservation of the nuclear family may have left little space for personal choice.

By contrast, in the 1990s, Oates presents characters that face multiple choices, but they are too weak to take advantage of them. Her upper-class baby boomers of the 1990s reject rationality and sobriety, and pursue immediate gratification of their wishes in defiance of the traditional Protestant ideals of hard work and respectability. The patterns of behavior and value systems of this period are based on those of the past but, as in *Expensive People*, in *What I Lived For*, inflation and exaggeration are apparent at every turn. This exaggeration frequently teeters on the edge of perversion. Oates is particularly critical of such phenomena as inflated upward mobility, social and racial exclusiveness, over-consumption, and indulgence in bodily pleasures. She chooses to render her tale of Union City’s upper classes in the form of a satiric parody. Immediately after its tragic and emotional prologue, the novel turns into a cynical parody of American ideals. Oates tells a story in which new emigrants obtain status and wealth, and then use their positions as politicians and executives to exploit the disenfranchised. Oates thus uses satire to expose the perversion that can result when people strive for success with little thought for responsibility, and to examine how much damage one individual’s success can inflict on the surrounding world.

In this chapter, I argue that in *What I Lived For*, Oates creates a direct relationship between affluence and corruption in both the corporate world and in local politics. Having been brought up to respect middle-class values, Oates’s characters lose sight of them when they become rich. In *My Heart*

Laid Bare, meanwhile, Oates examines how easy money can be made through gambling and con-artistry. The issues portrayed in these two novels call for particular attention in the light of the current (2009) “credit crunch” and unearthing of financial scandals. The chapter thus focuses on the relationship between political corruption, negligence, and the setting of the action in these two novels. I argue that Union City provides a mirror in which the outcomes of the inhabitants’ actions are reflected. Then, I discuss the meaning of work, upward mobility, conspicuous consumption, and the meaning of houses, family, and roots in Oates’s vision of 1990s America.

Union City: Reflections of Failure and Success

In the social satire *What I Lived For*, Oates chronicles the daily lives of American upper-middle-class individuals. The action takes place in Union City, a closed space consisting of central areas and residential districts that are arranged according to ethnic origin and the size of residents’ bank accounts. The reader learns that the fictional Union City is located “at the confluence of Lake Erie and the Chateaugay River,” in America’s New York State.¹⁶ Union City feels like an isolated, even claustrophobic, place, since the characters rarely mention leaving the city, or talk or think about other places. Just as she is restrictive and precise about the setting, Oates is also very particular about time: the main part of the novel starts on the morning of Friday 22 May 1992, and finishes in the evening of 25 May, while the prologue and epilogue each cover three days (24-27 December 1959, and 25-28 May 1992, respectively). Employing such a compact time frame allows Oates to concentrate on the most detailed aspects of her character portrayal, putting greatest emphasis on their use of language. She constantly contrasts her characters’ words with their deeds or the results of their actions, which are depicted in numerous Union City scenes.

The narrator of *What I Lived For* relates the story of Corky (Jerome) Cororan, a real estate dealer of Irish decent. For the most part, the narrator identifies with Corky; sometimes he refers to himself as Corky in the first-person singular (in italicized passages), but Oates mainly uses the third person singular. The narrator sees through Corky’s eyes, and feels through Corky’s heart and brains. By using a *one point of view* narrative, Oates allows the narrator to be very subjective, even unreliable, and “truth” in the narrative is subject to manipulation and bias. Since Corky does not trust himself, he does not trust others, and he tends to change his point of view. He is the ultimate “other-directed” individual, to use Riesman’s term; someone who is constantly adjusting his opinion in line with that of others. He even

manipulates himself, in order to boost his self-confidence; for example, he thinks, “His city. Where he is known. Where he’s important to a lot of people,”¹⁷ even though he has no evidence that so many people know him or consider him to be important.

The city scenes that are rendered explicit by the narrator do not simply provide a backdrop for the action; they also reflect the intellectual, emotional and physical state of the characters. For example, the Union City news summary that Corky hears on his car radio reflects the characters’ experiences in the narrative:

Union City is in a fiscal crisis, Union City is in a crime crisis, Union City is in a moral crisis, Union City *is* a crisis. Rust Belt casualty. Depopulating. Whites to the suburbs. So what else is new? Crime, drug use on the rise. AIDS deaths. AIDS babies. Tax base eroding. Once the third largest city in New York State now dropped to fifth. And fast falling.¹⁸

Replacing the words “Union City” with “Corky Corcoran” in the first sentence of the above quote offers us a good insight into the main character’s mind and life situation (and, to a lesser extent, those of the other characters). Corky has problems with IRS¹⁹ and his “limited partnership failures,”²⁰ Marilee Plummer has either committed suicide or has been killed, and Thalia, Corky’s step-daughter, has stolen his gun and attempted to murder Corky’s best friend, Vic Slattery. Corky’s friends have moved out to the suburbs, taking the income of the city with them; and almost everyone he knows is involved in corruption, crime or some sort of clandestine scam.

The narrative unfolds around Corky’s attempts to find his elusive step-daughter, Thalia. As he does so, Union City and its surroundings are presented as if filmed in slow motion: Corky’s eyes function as the camera lens, and his mind interprets the world for the reader. Due to the intensity of the action conveyed through Corky’s thoughts, minimal distance is achieved between the reader and the narrator. This “intensive psychological realism”²¹ allows Oates to evoke the reader’s empathy with Corky’s immoral and sometimes outrageous behavior. Corky considers himself to be at one with the city; it is his world, and he does not know any other. He does not embrace every aspect of the city, however: he despises the poor and the disenfranchised, and identifies himself with prominent politicians and the rich.

Metaphorically, the city reflects the conscience of the characters, and reveals their true natures. Like the portrait of Dorian Gray, every misdeed and

decadent act is reflected to expose the real character, while a beautiful and costly “façade” is presented to the public. If we compare Oates’s characters in her narratives about the poor, such as *them* or *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, we will see that the main difference lies in their honesty and straightforward natures. These latter characters do not seek to hide their poverty or their problems, and do not feel guilty or ashamed of their deprived conditions. By contrast, Oates’s middle-class characters tend to conceal their real selves so as to pretend that they are better (or better off) than they really are. Whatever immoral or ludicrous schemes are cooked up in Stuyvesant House (the Mayor’s residence), Charlotte’s villa, Corky’s house, the country clubs, or in Drummond’s house or in his yacht, the falling city offers a visible manifestation of the consequences:

Southward on Erie then past Union Boulevard suddenly passing the melancholy ruin of the old Palace Theatre in a block of partly razed buildings looking like a bomb site, Christ it’s true what Oscar Slattery’s detractors say the man is letting the South side, i.e. the black sector, go to hell, Corky sees the gabled and turreted structure of the fancy old ‘Egyptian’ – style theatre, the sagging marquee behind derelict scaffolding itself abandoned for years.²²

In Oates’s view, there are two sides to conspicuous consumption, showing off success and concealing failure. According to the author of the term, Thorstein Veblen, conspicuous consumption has to be wasteful “in order to effectually mend the consumer’s good fame.”²³ Corky intuitively knows that “no merit would accrue from the consumption of the bare necessities of life.”²⁴ He is a *nouveau riche*, a potential candidate for the upper classes, meaning that his lifestyle receives the scrutiny of his superiors: the Slatterys (the mayor’s family), other city councilors, and his ex-father-in-law and corporate associate, Ross Drummond. Corky is aware that he has to look good in order to “promote” his success. He wears Chanel suits and Christian Dior shirts, drives a Cadillac de Ville, and lives in an impressive villa. He attends receptions at the mayor’s residence, and enjoys luncheons in country clubs and sports pavilions. Oates counterbalances these visions of success with images of failure – the same Corky drunk, waking up in a ditch with vomit on his clothes, while his friends (as it later appears) are involved in criminal schemes. Those in the upper echelons of the governing classes, who make money from real estate and pose as the élite, are in fact thriving on the

city's decline. Conspicuous consumption serves to shield these corrupt individuals, preventing society from discovering the darker aspects of the success that is so central to the American Dream. Oates insists that in the context of such conspicuous consumption, what might appear to be success might not be success at all, since it can result not only in the failure of a community, but also in the failure of an individual.

Oates's depiction of social and economic relationships in Union City is similar to the concept of the naturalist city, as Richard Lehan describes it:

The naturalist city was a place of limits, a product of material activity and mechanical forces, all working in a zero-sum way. The city produced only so much wealth; therefore, if some were wealthy, others had to be poor. Adapting to the city involved the same rules as adapting to nature: some would succeed; others fail.²⁵

Thus, for the ruling élite to succeed, many ordinary people have to fail. Although as a post-industrial city, Union City generates its income from the services sector, life in Union City is based on natural selection and the "rat race," rather than on reason, humanistic ideals or Christian values. The inhabitants seem to draw on moral values similar to those listed in the "Catechism of Abraham Licht" in *My Heart Laid Bare*: "*No success without another's failure. No failure without another's success.*"²⁶ In this city, wealth is a product of exploitation: the numerous apartments rented to poor welfare recipients, the real estate speculation, and the financial schemes. Union City is also the location for complex international financial transactions that do not benefit the city, as such. Oates paints a picture of exploitation and self-interest on a gargantuan scale:

there is so much fucking office space vacant in the centre city, some of it owned by Corcoran, Inc., but a lot of it too, in other new high-rises, the situation is crazy unless you know the tax breaks these guys get, financiers they're called, few of them locals, no interest in Union City at all. New York City-based Companies, Toronto, even Tokyo. (A lot of stink, local publicity, about some Jap company taking over the bankrupt First Fidelity Bank tower.) Corky hates their guts, these fuckers, crooks, still you have to admire them – calculations on such a scale, it's cosmic.²⁷

Why has this city become so unimportant, and been left to decay? In an earlier quote, Union City was described as a “Rust Belt casualty.” As Greg Johnson indicates, Union City is modeled on Buffalo and Lockport, cities with which the young Oates was familiar.²⁸ These cities were dominated by heavy industry, and later had to adapt their economies in order to survive. The fictional Union City reflects the problems experienced by a number of Midwest cities that had been prosperous in the 1950s and the 1960s, but declined in the 1990s. As Jon Teaford²⁹ shows, in contrast to European cities, American cities were built in a so-called “doughnut” form, with industry located in the old center, and residential areas around the edge. Prompted by various governmental regulations, growing economic prosperity, and their values, the middle classes fled to suburban towns around the cities. Companies followed, relocating to industrial parks outside metropolitan areas. As Jackson writes, suburbia has not only assumed the role of the residential, cultural and shopping center, but has also lured industry away from the cities to rural areas.³⁰ This proved to be a fatal step in the development of the 20th-century American city, because

velvet-lawned suburbs escape full responsibility for the welfare and crime problems of the central cities; and while industry rich suburbs enjoy a low tax rate, low income residential communities suffer the burdens that arise from a poor tax base. Twentieth century municipal limits are not simply lines on a map; they pose formidable barriers to equity and to cooperation within the metropolitan region.³¹

The sociologist and political scientist, Seymour Lipset, points out that according to Gallup International Research, in the late 1970s, “close to three fifths (56%) of those interviewed in the United States stated they would like to live in rural areas or in a small town of up to ten thousand persons.”³² Lipset explains that “antagonism to big cities in America has been linked for many decades to an image of these communities as centers of moral corruption, sin and irreligion, an image held by fundamentalists and Evangelical protestants.”³³ Indeed, Corky Corcoran sums up decades of economic, moral and religious arguments in a few sentences, as follows:

These ‘communities’ of middle- and upper-middle-class whites fleeing Union City taking their schools, churches, hospitals, community services with them: fuckers. Real estate value’s a

teeter-totter: the city's loss is the suburbs' gain. Even in this fucking recession.³⁴

Oates also paints Union City's past as an ironic success story. By indicating that Union City was previously called New Amsterdam and settled by Dutch traders in 1600,³⁵ she hints at a possible representation of New York. Her references to history, to the first settlers and the city's forefathers, evoke feelings of optimism and idealism; they hark back to the conquest of nature and the expansion of American territory. Oates uses rough and direct language to reveal the other side of the success story, however: "the new world was there for grabbing."³⁶ Scenes depicting the glory of "the completion of the Erie Canal, 1825"³⁷ or "Captain Oliver H. Perry after his Lake Erie victory over the British Canadian Enemy"³⁸ overshadow the thousands of deaths among "Irish and Chinese laborers,"³⁹ and the inhuman conditions suffered by the new immigrants who dug the canals and built the country's infrastructure. Oates thus emphasizes that the heroic past and glorious victories came at the cost of many human lives and unbearable living conditions:

Living and dying so long ago these young men were not recalled in any family tales. Nor buried in Our Lady of Mercy Cemetery. Buried instead where they'd died of dysentery, yellow fever, influenza, beatings and stabbings and shootings, buried in the muck along the canal banks. Living in tents, what kind of food were they fed, what kind of sanitation did New York State provide, must've died like flies.
Irish and Chinese laborers mainly.⁴⁰

In 1991, the living conditions of many of Union City's inhabitants are not much better, which also hints at the fact that the success of the élite is being paid for by the failure of the many:

... the notorious State Street Project built in 1973, where hundreds, or is it thousands, of black welfare recipients live dense as insects in vertical hives. In the mid-1980s, Corcoran, Inc., invested in a residential-rental property down here [...] building so ugly to the eye and so offensive to the nose Corky couldn't bring himself to visit it even to check up on his super...⁴¹

Oates paints a negative picture of Union City; it is a place of destruction and deterioration, of moral degradation, social and economic exploitation and racial tensions. It is also a place where culture is being destroyed instead of being created, and the old buildings of Union City are crumbling:

Passing the Ballard Street depot in the gloom. It's a massive old building still dignified like a cathedral, though layered in grime, porticos and Gothic arches and somber granite figures bracketing the great clock above the front entrance, slated for demolition until the Historical Register people got on the case. ... Up into the early 1960s the depot had been a busy place, then a steady decline, much of the building's unused now since there are so few trains daily, dim-yellow interior lights and only two taxis at the curb and homeless sprawled in the doorways and this long depressing stretch of crumbling brick wall plastered over in posters, shredding and rotting paper like leprosy. Fucking mausoleum.⁴²

In their place, some cheap imitations have been built; not for posterity, but as short-term investments:

Kiki's building has its architectural pretensions, it's disconcertingly similar to the Georgian Colonial façade of Corky's own house, red brick and white portico and trim, broad white shutters, that all-American look, sheerly phony. Inside it's cheap materials, built to last maybe twenty years, some of the fixtures, bathroom racks, doorknobs, coming off in your hand, and those processed wood doors that warp so they can't close – Corky knows, he owns properties like this himself, short term investments.⁴³

The preservation of old buildings takes second or even third place on the city council's agenda. Corky, for example, attends a fundraising event primarily to seduce Christina Kavanaugh (who later becomes his lover) and to reinforce his image as a caring politician, and only in the last place because he cares about the Maiden Vale library building. Meanwhile, Corky's ex-father-in-law Ross Drummond, a Union City committee member, helps to sink "the Downtown Refurbishing Project" on the grounds that it is not lucrative to invest in culture.

Oates herself seems to have little love for American cities: she summed up her experience of residing in Detroit for a couple of years as: “when you’re young and naïve you might end up in Detroit.”⁴⁴ For her, Detroit became a “Murder City” instead of a “Motor City.”⁴⁵ It seems that she has given up on the idea of the post-industrial city as a center of progress and cultural development, and as a market place for agricultural and manufactured products and for ideas. Her portrait of Detroit in *them* was not as depressing; although the cityscape consisted of shabby and burned-out buildings, there was no decay. Detroit in *them* is poor, and there is a high crime rate; Union City, by contrast, has been abandoned, and is being destroyed by its own city councilors. The flight of the city’s upper-class inhabitants has brought economic and cultural devastation, since those with money have stopped investing in the city. In Oates’s view, the flight has proved fatal not only for the city and its poor inhabitants, but also threatens the upper- and middle classes, who have deprived themselves of participating in cultural life, and in the broader community. Such isolation leads to emotional and intellectual exhaustion and to psychological disorders, which Oates suggests by using recurrent images of gluttony, alcoholism and anorexia.

In Oates’s fiction, the city is also identified with the mind, while the suburb, with its consumption and moneymaking, stands for the body. The body is glorified and put on a pedestal; its needs are extravagantly catered for in numerous clubs and restaurants, breakfasts and receptions; while its spiritual needs are suppressed and neglected, together with the cinemas, theaters, libraries and museums. Deprived of investment and economic opportunities, the city has become an insecure, unlivable place that reflects the turmoil and restlessness experienced by its upper-class inhabitants. Ironically, this kind of success actually means failure, since the only thing that these people have is money; and the only thing for which they are responsible, the city, turns out to be a complete failure.

Decadent Dublin Versus the Fallen Union City

What I Lived For can be considered a “literary marriage” between Oates and James Joyce, along with Oates’s reworking of Joyce’s short story, “The Dead.”⁴⁶ Oates quotes from *Ulysses* in the epigraph, thus establishing a connection between the two narratives at the very beginning of the novel. The two novels are related in numerous ways: both are set in cities, the action takes place within a compact time period, the scenes in the novels correspond (to a certain extent), the novels are related thematically, and there is a certain kinship between the characters. For example, *Ulysses*’s sonless father, Leo-

pold Bloom, corresponds with the childless Corky in *What I Lived For*; while Thalia, Corky's step-daughter, is a representation of Stephen Dedalus (a transgression by Oates, who makes Thalia a step-daughter rather than a surrogate son). Corky's narcissistic ex-wife, Charlotte, is a parody of Bloom's adulterous wife, Molly. Moreover, Corky's visit to a crematorium and morgue hints at the funeral that Bloom attends; failed sex with Kiki alludes to Bloom's masturbation scene on the beach, when he is aroused by Gerty Mac Dowell; and both Corky and Bloom visit taverns and similar establishments. Like Joyce, Oates pays close attention to the details of conversations and monologues. She also concentrates on the human body and bodily sensations, just as Joyce paid a lot of attention to bodily organs and their functions in his work.

James Joyce was particularly aware of the fact that in Victorian literature, the mind had been celebrated and the body suppressed. He thus wanted "to afford the body a recognition equal to that given to the mind."⁴⁷ In turn, in *What I Lived For*, Oates emphasizes those parts of the body and bodily needs that can overwhelm the mind, such as indulgence in sex or alcoholism. The persistence of such needs is expressed by the hammering voice in Corky's head: "*I need a drink and I need it right now.*"⁴⁸ Oates thereby reveals her concern that when satiating bodily desires in a world that is commercially adjusted to satisfy them, an individual can easily be deprived of their intellectual capacities. This is especially the case when the individual concerned has achieved economic independence, and can afford to indulge in limitless consumption. A business lunch scene⁴⁹ featuring Corky and his financial advisor, Greenbaum, offers a good illustration of this tension between the mind and the body. Greenbaum mostly drinks water, and has half a glass of wine with a salad, whereas Corky drinks scotch, a bottle of wine, and eats a three-course lunch. Greenbaum, who represents the "mind," leafs through the papers, talks business, and finally insists that next time, they should meet in the office, where they will be able to discuss more effectively. Corky, meanwhile, constantly deviates from the meeting's purpose, discussing irrelevant matters, telling entertaining stories, and thinking of the sex that he has just had. Thus, if James Joyce had insisted on recognizing the body because it had been suppressed, Oates's emphasis on the body is a plea for recognition of the mind.

In her examination of success and failure, Oates, following Joyce, is critical of heroism and grand ambitions. As I suggested earlier, she tallies the cost of victories and industrial accomplishments, not in terms of money, but in terms of human lives. Joyce deliberately avoids heroism and grand ambi-

tions; the humble life of Leopold Bloom, who is happy with his lot, is Joyce's definition of success. Corky, by contrast, imagines himself to be much more than he is, but his imagined success is actually his failure. In juxtaposition to Bloom's stability, simplicity and personal sincerity, Oates confronts the reader with Corky's restlessness and vain illusions. Joyce's *Ulysses* is not a satire; it is a sincere appreciation of an ordinary life lived in the monotonous city of Dublin. *What I Lived For*, however, is a grotesque satire on one man's inflated political and entrepreneurial ambitions, and his narcissistic exaggeration of the importance of achievement in the decaying Union City.

With this novel, Oates sets forth her argument against romantic heroes, an argument that she had introduced in an essay on Sylvia Plath.⁵⁰ The romantic hero, a successful man of action, is the ultimate embodiment of the American Dream. In the past, as Christopher Lasch suggests, it was the man's role to conquer the wilderness and establish a safe place where his women and children could live.⁵¹ In 1990, when *What I Lived For* is set, the romantic heroes of the age are famous media figures, celebrities, and politicians who extol the virtues of democracy. When it comes to this kind of romanticism, Oates allies herself firmly with James Joyce: both *What I Lived For* and *Ulysses* emphasize ordinariness and the importance of detail and the littleness of a character, not the heroic ways of half-gods such as Odysseus.⁵² James Joyce "was reacting against the cult of Cúchulainn," claiming that "the ordinary was the proper domain of the artist,"⁵³ and that narratives of heroic and redemptive violence do "not project the true nature of the Irish character."⁵⁴ Oates, meanwhile, is using *What I Lived For* to question the heroic aspects of the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the demonstration of American military power. She expresses these views through a speech that is made by a minor character at a military parade. Former US Marine First Lieutenant Billy Brannon says:

If the dead could speak to us today, instead of us presuming to speak for them, we might be shocked at what they would say: no more 'heroic' deaths, no more 'sacrifice' no more wars, no more Memorial Days!⁵⁵

Both James Joyce and Oates define success in terms of an ordinary life, free of military heroism and executive scandals. While Joyce imagined the city as home to a peaceful, regular life, however, Oates seems to negate such a possibility. Her characters feel homeless at home, their work does not connect with any higher value, and they do not like their city as it is; but

having all the power in their hands, instead of making the city livable, they can only ruin it further.

Work and Gambling

In her portrayal of work in Union City, Oates alludes to the archetypal, self-made man, and is critical of his modern representations. Ross Drummond (Corky's ex-father-in-law) and Oscar Slattery (Corky's surrogate father) are self-made men, who accumulated their wealth through legal and illegal business practices. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah pictures the self-made man as a "self-sufficient entrepreneur, competitive, tough, and freed by wealth from external constraints. Certainly much of the moral appeal of the self-made man is his apparent freedom."⁵⁶ Christopher Lasch, meanwhile, emphasizes the self-made man's focus on the future, and his hope for financial returns on his investments:

he lived for the future, shunning self-indulgence in favor of patient, painstaking accumulation; and as long as the collective prospect looked on the whole so bright, he found in the deferral of gratification not only his principal gratification but an abundant source of profits.⁵⁷

Union City is populated with self-made men who started their businesses from scratch, built them up and became wealthy; men who are sober and self-disciplined, but also corrupt. Oscar Slattery says, "My son has never learnt to campaign. He's afraid of getting his hands dirty."⁵⁸ Corky Corcoran represents the new generation; a generation which, according to Christopher Lasch, due to financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future, has replaced the traditional ideals of moderation and saving with the immediate gratification of desires. Corky perceives himself to be a self-made man, someone who "raised himself up from practically nothing... he's a millionaire! And his political success. And his social success. He's an intimate friend of the Slattery's."⁵⁹ He wants to live his life to the full now, and is not prepared to postpone gratification of his desires, as the self-made man from the past would have done.

Work in Union City resembles gambling, rather than sophisticated, socially-responsible corporate practice. Commercial activities consist of series of "good deal[s]"⁶⁰ rather than meticulously planned and well-calculated actions. Corky Corcoran dropped out of college after one semester, and made his first tidy sum by borrowing 10,000 dollars and betting on a boxing match.

Education and knowledge have played minor roles in his career; what is important is making a good impression on the right people, and having a gambler's instinct. For this reason, the methodical and sensible financial consultant Greenbaum, whom Corky hires to help him, puzzles Corky as much as Corky puzzles him: "Good God Jerome! – do you mean you commonly bet such sums of money? And you win?"⁶¹

In Union City, work has shed the respectability that it had in previous decades; it no longer matters what you do for a living, as long as you create the right image. A great deal of investment is required to obtain the artifacts of a flashy lifestyle and an aura of success (the countless dinners, and the expensive clothes, houses and cars). Honest work could never maintain such extravagance, so the novel's characters turn to speculation and illegal practices. Marriages can also become a ludicrous business. In this sense, Charlotte's first ex-husband, Sherwood Braunbeck, represents the ultimate hero of the time. Braunbeck appears as if from nowhere; he is "charismatic," and the "ultimate leader."⁶² He makes contact with rich men through their trusting wives, and sells "partnerships in companies with insufficient assets or no assets at all."⁶³ Eventually, his father-in-law "bails him out,"⁶⁴ buying him out of the marriage and bribing him to leave the city. He moves to "Palm Beach [to live] with a rich widow 'old enough to be his mother.'"⁶⁵

As I argue in chapter four of this study, Oates portrays a change in the American character from the reliable and calculating type who believes in the Protestant work ethic, to one who wants to make a quick fortune with minimum effort, thereby transforming life and hard work into a game. In her novel, *My Heart Laid Bare* (1998), Oates successfully continues with the themes of gambling and con-artistry. The novel opens with the story of a young woman, Sarah Wilcox, an 18th-century English lady's maid who, by stealing jewelry from her landlady, sets a precedent for later events. When she is caught, she is "transported to America as a bondwoman" rather than hung,⁶⁶ where she engages in various scams. The function of this prologue is to remind the reader that the settlers coming from Europe to the New World inevitably brought their vices with them, and for some, coming to the New World was a form of punishment.

My Heart Laid Bare is part of the gothic quintet that Oates conceived in the late 1980s⁶⁷ as a means of revising different aspects of American history. The novel is a parabolic tale that portrays the Lichts, a family of con artists who lived at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Motivated by greed and vanity, the members of the family assume different roles, often appearing before their victims when the latter are at their most

vulnerable. This allows the Lichts to gain their victim's trust and that of surrounding people and, if the scheme succeeds, cheat them out of their money or property, or, at the very least, spend a few months living in luxury as a houseguest. The Lichts are skilled manipulators, crooks, psychologists and actors; rather than living life, they play "The Game."⁶⁸ They have perfected the "arts of seduction,"⁶⁹ and enjoy a luxurious existence practicing them. In this novel, Oates also suggests that it is the credibility of an image that counts, and "the one unforgivable sin [is] to fail to escape."⁷⁰

The Lichts' money-earning activities vary from impersonating others to involving their victims in financial schemes. The reader will inevitably draw parallels between the latter activities and the current (2008-2009) credit crisis, and financial scams such as Bernard Madoff's pyramid scheme. In December 2008, Madoff was accused of "what may be the largest financial fraud in history, a Ponzi scheme whose losses could run as high as \$50 billion."⁷¹ While writing *My Heart Laid Bare*, Oates must have been aware of the Charles Ponzi schemes that had duped people in the 1920s, the period depicted in her narrative.⁷² Nevertheless, her fictional, credulous investors bear similarities to the real-life investors who more recently fell prey to Madoff's lies. One of the victims of the Madoff affair told a *New York Times* reporter:

'You have a lot of wealthy people who made a lot of money on handshakes,' said Mark S. Weiss, a commercial real estate broker at Newmark Knight Frank, where several brokers had invested heavily with Mr. Madoff. There was 'something about this person, pedigree and reputation that inspired trust.'⁷³

Conmen operate on the basis that people are eager to believe in their lies, even if they suspect that something is not quite right. In *My Heart Laid Bare*, the Lichts' victims allow themselves to be swindled in order to save their families' reputations, or to spare the feelings of family members:

Sharp-eyed old Stafford Shrikesdale saw within seconds of their meeting that this 'amnesiac nephew' of his ... was an imposter. Yet so stunned was he, so thrown off balance by the audacity of the man's game, Stafford could do no more than stare at him and stammer a faint, faltering greeting and, to his subsequent chagrin, *shake the bastard's hand*.⁷⁴

Wanting to maintain peace in the family, Stafford Shrikesdale does not voice his suspicions. Like other con artists, the Lichts thrive on feelings of submissiveness, guilt, and greed. When a scheme does not involve investments, they blackmail, cheat and bribe to reach their goal. Indeed, the system itself may facilitate such actions, as a comment in *The New York Times* suggests: “The outsize impact on the industry may have resulted largely because Mr. Madoff … managed his funds much the way that real estate leaders have operated successfully for decades: He provided little information and demanded a lot of trust.”⁷⁵

Similar practices characterize the politics of Union City. For a start, Congressman “Vic Slattery, rising fast in the Party and acquiring the most precious of all commodities, the *national image*”⁷⁶ uses blackmail to strengthen his campaign, assisted and encouraged by his father and Mayor of Union City, Oscar Slattery. Both Corky and Vic are careful to continuously polish and promote their images, since “nothing succeeds like an appearance of success.”⁷⁷ In Corky’s philosophy, “in a democracy, a politician needs to be liked. Trusted. If not you don’t get the vote, you don’t get in office. Your good intentions are worth shit.”⁷⁸ In spite of everything that you might do in your business life or as a politician, you “have to come across as completely in control, winning and appealing and smiling and sincere, a politician’s nothing if he can’t come across as sincere.”⁷⁹

In *What I Lived For*, Oates draws on the image of the surrogate father (that is, Oscar Slattery as Corky’s surrogate father), who tries to raise another man’s child to be loyal to themselves and their own children. Oates presents this relationship as a very strong kind of bond that, from the child’s perspective, is based on both guilt and gratitude. While Jessie Harte (*Wonderland*) manages to free himself from his surrogate father, Dr. Pedersen, Corky does not; and he does not even wish to. The Slatterys are Corky’s role models, the family that rescued him from poverty (as he sees it). It was Oscar who paid for Corky’s education and occasionally brought him home in his limo; in doing so, he raised the most loyal servant of all. Corky tolerates anything: “they pick you up, they sometimes set you down – sure there’ve been dry spells when the Slatterys, both Vic and Oscar, seemed to have forgotten Corky Corcoran’s existence – but they pick you up again.”⁸⁰ The Slattery-Corcoran combination echoes that of the Lichts in *My Heart Laid Bare*; Abraham Licht, the father, adopts children into his family and raises them as his own, breeding loyalty into them. Oates seems to be suggesting that in corporate life as well as in politics, one can find secret and non-transparent clans of loyal people. Such networks enable those involved to pursue their

personal goals, even when the means used are illegal. Corky Corcoran reflects on the fact that as a child, he already knew how the world worked:

At the new school Corky – still, then, ‘Jerome’ – hadn’t any real friends until Vic Slattery, and after that, quick as Blackstone’s magic, he had lots of friends. Start at the top, Corky knew even as a fifteen-year-old and everything else follows. Kids who wouldn’t piss on you will rush to be your friends if you’re friends with a big shot – ‘social life’ is as simple as that. He’d set his sights on Vic because Vic was tops.⁸¹

Through the character of Corky the politician, Oates explores the ways in which generations of politicians have engaged in corruption, vice and dishonest work. The cynicism that Oates voices in Corky’s inner monologues, in which he seeks to justify his actions and those of his friends, extends to the most famous families in America:

It was known that Oscar Slattery’s father and uncles, wealthy merchants from the 1940s onward, had made their original bundle during Prohibition, had a hand in bootlegging and rum-running out of Canada like certain of Corky’s kin, though on a grander scale. With more conspicuous results. Like old Joe Kennedy, patriarch of America’s first family. Yes, and why not? – even the awed first settlers must have caught on, this New World is here for grabbing.⁸²

Oates’s hints and allusions concerning the Kennedys, one of America’s most prominent families, in *What I Lived For*, become more direct accusations in *Black Water* (1992). In this novella, Oates depicts an idealistic young woman, Kelly Kelleher, as a counter character to, and a victim of, a politician. Kelly, who is considering a career in politics and is fascinated by the Senator’s charismatic personality, agrees to be driven by him in his car. The Senator loses his way, crashes the car into a ravine, and saves himself while leaving her to drown.⁸³ The story consists of a record of Kelly’s life, told via the feelings and thoughts that she experiences as flashbacks before she dies. *Black Water* was inspired by the 1969 Chappaquiddick incident, and the sense of injustice that Oates felt for the victim. At the time, it was alleged that the driver, Edward Kennedy, had been under the influence when he caused an accident and left his passenger, Mary Jo Kopechne,⁸⁴ to drown.

Kennedy was later acquitted. Greg Johnson's citation from Oates's diary reveals how upset Oates had been by the injustice of the incident:

'It's infuriating,' she wrote, 'when Ted Kennedy repeatedly refers to the incident as a "tragic accident" – it was an accident that, while drunk, he drove a car into the water, but it was no accident that he allowed his passenger to drown. Imagine – he didn't report the accident for nine hours. Yet he wasn't charged with anything except leaving the scene.'⁸⁵

Another incident that might lie behind Oates's damning portrait of American politicians in Union City could have been the acquittal of William Kennedy Smith on rape charges in 1991.⁸⁶ Although such incidents involving the Kennedys are more moral than political in nature, Oates is nevertheless concerned about politicians' lack of integrity. Both incidents might have influenced her depiction of politics in Union City, and especially the behavior of the local political dynasty, the Slatterys. One can sense not only Oates's sarcasm, but perhaps also her anger, in the credo of Oscar Slattery: "Politics is a game played down in the dirt."⁸⁷ The wisdom expressed by Corky's Uncle Sean might as well be true: a politician is "a guy who uses you then dumps you then climbs on your dead body to raise himself."⁸⁸

Oates is also making us aware of the discrepancy between the image that is created and sold to the public by a public figure, and the person's real nature that becomes visible in their deeds. She is also worried that people tend to believe in images, and are blind to the transgressions and misdeeds committed by celebrated figures. Kelly in *Black Water* represents naiveté and "wishful thinking," since she trusts the Senator's "image" – his interpretation in the press and other media – without knowing the real person. In this sense, her trust is similar to that displayed by Corky, who believes that Oscar Slattery is really his friend and surrogate father, and lets himself be manipulated:

Know why I trust you, Corky? Oscar Slattery once said, rye whiskey on his breath which meant he'd be telling the truth, You don't take any bullshit and you don't hand it out, just like your old man. That's why.⁸⁹

Oscar Slattery, the Mayor of Union City, sets up the black politician Marcus Steadman on rape charges in order to remove him from the political

arena. Oates thus paints a picture of a society at war, in which individuals constantly assess one another in order to remain one step ahead, being unable to stay still for fear of being left out. Individuals exploit social relationships, friendships, love, and communal activities in order to propel themselves forward; to secure a place, be it a city council seat, a job or a marriage. Owing to their dependence on other people's secret dealings and scams, an individual cannot be free or feel secure. Corky's worst nightmare is to end up on (his friend) Oscar Slattery's "shit list,"⁹⁰ and over the years, like a wild animal, he has developed an ability to read the symbols and signs that might warn him of danger. For example, when he enters the dining room of the Chateauguay Country Club for Vic Slattery's fundraising party, he double-checks his social standing:

They have dropped me from the head table Corky thinks almost calmly but no: he checks the place cards, there's Jerome Corcoran between Sandra Slattery and Andrew van Buren the Mohawk County Democratic chairman. First time in Corky's career he's been so publicly so visibly *raised*.⁹¹

Young career women also become entangled in Union City's net of corruption. Three of Oates's female characters are involved with men at the top: Thalia, Kiki Zaller and Marilee Plummer. All three are extreme types: on one hand, they play glamour girls at the parties and clubs; and on the other, they are disappointed and bitter women, seeking revenge and toting guns. These girls are already corrupt; Marilee complies with Mayor Oscar Slattery's request that she falsely accuse another politician of rape. Afterwards, she commits suicide because she had "got in over her head, she couldn't deal with it."⁹² Thalia, meanwhile, tries to shoot Vic Slattery and badly wounds Corky; and Kiki uses sex as a tool of revenge. The involvement of these girls in the game of power, and their rebellion against it, eventually destroy them; and at the same time, in losing these young women, Union City is also losing its future.

In his attempt to explain why images have become so important, Christopher Lasch asserts the following:

Today men seek the kind of approval that applauds not their actions but their personal attributes. They wish to be not so much esteemed as admired. They crave not fame but glamour and excitement of celebrity. They want to be envied rather than

respected. Pride and acquisitiveness, the sins of an ascendant capitalism, have given their way to vanity. Most Americans would still define success as riches, fame, and power, but their actions show that they have little interest in the substance of these attainments. What a man does matters less than the fact that he has ‘made it.’⁹³

“You’re an American, you’re good as you look,”⁹⁴ Corky thinks; and at the same time, he feels insecure, because very often, he does not know where he stands. There are no benchmarks for judging one’s behavior or the strength of one’s image. When everything depends on image, one is reliant on the comments made by others in one’s circle, or by outsiders, and on reading and interpreting the facial expressions of one’s conversation partners. In this way, hearsay, rumors, lobbying, and manipulation become powerful forces and start to replace objective facts; and pseudo-reality starts to replace real life.

In Union City, work – be it corporate activities or political administrative work – has lost its respectability. Work is no longer a means to fulfillment, but a way to satisfy shallow and narcissistic ambitions. If success is to be achieved through work, it cannot be achieved honestly, but rather through swindles, scams, bribes, and gambling. If activities are legal, then they are not directed towards enhancing the welfare of Union City’s inhabitants, but towards making the rich richer. Corky’s professional and political advancement is not achieved through education and hard work, but through nepotism and networking with important people. In the epilogue, while Corky is lying in hospital, it is suggested that he will become a candidate for “Mayor of Union City, now Oscar Slattery is resigning.”⁹⁵ In Oates’s Union City, one corrupt politician replaces another.

Upward Mobility

Upward mobility, one of the most important aspects of middle-class life, is also one of Oates’s greatest concerns. On the one hand, she values opportunities to better one’s economic circumstances, both for oneself and for future generations. On the other, she is also aware of the extent of the corruption involved. One person’s economic advancement can be achieved at the cost of another’s. The characters’ climb up the social ladder in *What I Lived For* and *My Heart Laid Bare* goes together with unethical, immoral and criminal practices. Oates often suggests that achieving higher social status is linked with the satisfaction of vain ambitions, rather than with the wish to

create something meaningful. The novels, *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, *Expensive People* and *Wonderland*, illustrate this perception: having achieved what they had sought, the characters either lose anything else they had, or perish: Clara Walpole loses her son, the son of Nada kills her, and Jessie Harte almost loses his daughter to drugs and self-destruction. In most of her middle-class novels, Oates uses flashbacks to trace the characters' social mobility, from their origins (when they consider themselves to be nobodies) to their emergence as rich and important people. One of Oates's most successful social achievers, Rebecca Swart in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, eventually enjoys a fulfilling life as an upper-middle-class mother and wife, although she misses her family and past. Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde* achieves fame, but it destroys her. The relentless drive to scale the social ladder is also salient in Corky's case. Corky embodies the American Dream in every respect, from being an orphan of Irish descent to becoming a city councilor and, potentially, Mayor of Union City.

In order to explain why Corky Corcoran so desperately tries to "make it," Oates contrasts the lifestyle of the city's deprived inhabitants with that of the upper-middle class villa districts and country clubs. The ghettos in *What I Lived For* are observed safely through car windows, as if so much as stepping outside would mean catching downward mobility syndrome: "Corky could not bring himself to visit," and "after a quick glance he averts his eyes."⁹⁶ The ghettos and the homeless around the depot are there to remind you that this is where you are going to end up if you fail. Yet, because of the congenital hope to succeed, the American Dream is alive and luring new generations of immigrants. Corky sees that where the Irish used to live, there are now Hispanics, Appalachians and "hillbillies," all hoping to get their slice of the American pie.

This dream, in turn, has its roots in the individualistic, Protestant ethic that if you work hard enough you will succeed, regardless of the economic situation. It therefore follows that those who do not "make it" are worthless, because they have failed to work hard enough. Along with other religious virtues, such logic might have been useful in times of deprivation when the state was under-resourced, but in the 1990s, Katherine Newman argues, this ethic needs to be reconsidered. In her analysis of middle-class downward mobility, she asserts that "about one in five American men skid down the occupational hierarchy in their working lives."⁹⁷ Her argument is that downward mobility is something that nobody talks about, and is ignored by politicians, scholars and the public. The mass media focuses on the successful or on the idea that all Americans believe that life is getting better. It is worth

noting that today, however, in the midst of a recession, the media is emphasizing economic problems and analyzing what might have caused them. It remains to be seen if, and how, the current economic crisis will change American attitudes towards dazzling success and unlimited profit.

By contrasting the lives of the fortunate with those of the disenfranchised, Oates highlights this socio-economic problem of disregarding the other side of the American Dream. She appeals to human reason and conscience through the allegory of the pathologist, Dr. Wiegler: “We’re like Cro-Magnons, occupying one of those hundred-million-dollar high rises downtown without a clue how they even got there.”⁹⁸ He suggests that while Union City’s inhabitants are equipped with state-of-the-art technology and are able to generate wealth, they do not know what they are doing, for the city is falling apart, the rich are obsessed with their own image, and the poor cannot make ends meet. Dr. Wiegler inverts the common understanding of what it means to be human. For him, the body is God and the soul is “shit. [For] not one of us … could invent the bodies we inhabit, let alone the brains.”⁹⁹ Such statements add an extra dimension to the meaninglessness of scaling the social ladder and achieving importance, when the city’s disenfranchised groups cannot be provided with even the most elementary of care, and when Union City itself is falling into decay.

Since Oates’s characters can only see one option remaining – that of constantly nurturing their status – upward mobility becomes a severe form of the struggle for survival. One has to compete with others in order to grab opportunities. Corky is also constantly on guard, careful not to give away any information that could supposedly harm him. When the characters talk to each other, the dialogue has subtextual meanings; the thought that someone else knows more than they are supposed to is always at the back of their minds. In a couple of scenes in the novel, Corky physically fights with bodyguards in order to show them their place, as if they were his competitors. As Julie Sheridan argues,¹⁰⁰ Corky views his life in Union City as if he were a boxer in the ring:

One thing at a time as, in the handball court or in the ring, it’s one move at a time, and your eye never leaving your opponent. Not for a split second for it’s in that split second you’re fucked.¹⁰¹

Although the action of the novel takes place over three days in 1991, a large part of the narrative consists of the past as relived in Corky’s mind. As

such, in his thoughts, Corky constantly inhabits two worlds: the political and corporate world of Union City, and the traditional Irish world of his past. Many questions concerning his Irish family remain to be answered, especially those relating to his father's death; in Corky's family, there were feelings that were never expressed, and words that were never said. With this context, Oates presents the reader with another set of contrasts: traditional versus postindustrial concepts of upward mobility, and Corky's ancestors' understandings of success versus Corky's. According to Christopher Lasch, the concept of social advancement in America has changed a lot in the course of time. The archetypical, self-made man in the American Dream was characterized by "sobriety, moderation, self-discipline and avoidance of debt,"¹⁰² and he "owed his advancement to habits of industry."¹⁰³ The Puritans did not see anything wrong with personal prosperity as long as it was related to the prosperity of the community, whereas "the Yankee stressed self-improvement."¹⁰⁴ The 19th century saw emphasis on self-improvement, thereby preserving such "Protestant virtues [as]... industry, thrift,[and] temperance."¹⁰⁵ By the end of 19th century, competition had emerged as an acceptable pattern of behavior, and the "will to win" was already being stressed. With the advancement of technology, the world became increasingly competitive, leading to the ethic of "management of interpersonal relationships. The captain of industry gave way to the confidence man, the master of impressions."¹⁰⁶

Having arrived in America, Corky's ancestors were prevented from taking – or rather, deprived themselves of – their share of wealth. The family history revolved around drinking, disobedience, bare-knuckle fights and the gallows. Given the 19th-century ideals of discipline and self-denial, these rough-living Irish Catholics were excluded from participating in society's collective achievements. For Tim Corcoran, Corky's father, the Irish Hill came to represent the family's history of failures, and his inferiority as an Irishman in Union City; "shit on their [the rich, WASPS] shoes."¹⁰⁷ His ambition reached far beyond the Irish Hill, as he started to identify himself with achievers and powerful men. The character of Tim Corcoran embodies the emergence of the ethic of "image"; in the beginning, it was an attempt to impress his wife; and later he started to admire himself and his material possessions. Corky's Uncle Sean explains:

Because they [Tim and Theresa, Corky's parents] were crazy about each other and it blew things out of proportion – how Tim saw himself, or wanted to see himself. How he had to play

things out, with her looking on. Like in the war, too he never got over that. Everything meant too much! ... Like nothing could be the way other people did it, running a business where you compromise, make deals, get along. The way everybody else did it including our own father – that's why. Because he got himself killed, that's fucking why! Never thought it could really happen like he was some hot-shit hero in a movie, just couldn't believe what everybody else knew including me but would he listen?¹⁰⁸

Although the Corcorans were Catholics, they assimilated the New World mentality and Benjamin Franklin's ideal of freedom: that is, man can be free if he is "by the practice of industry and frugality, free from debt, which exposes a man to confinement, and a species of slavery to his creditors."¹⁰⁹ Tim Corcoran is the first to break with family tradition and borrow money – to reject one of the essential qualities of the self-made man. In order to escape his past and to move up the social ladder, he borrows "a hundred thousand dollars from the bank to buy into Maiden Vale [an exclusive district of Union City] like nobody'd know where he came from if he could just get there by the Union City Golf Club maybe they'd vote him in."¹¹⁰ By acquiring property in a highly desirable block, the Corcorans seek to gain a new identity, a better social position, to earn the respect of others, and to feel respectable. However, in Oates's world-view, such social positioning – undertaken purely out of vanity – must end in tragedy. The new neighborhood that the family had seen as a symbol of success, social improvement and security, turns out to be a neighborhood of isolation, self-destruction and death.

The desire to achieve a better image – that of a successful man, someone who has "made it" – trumps the spiritual and emotional needs of the individual and of the family. The individual is thus estranged from the "earth," as Oates writes in the essay cited at the beginning of this chapter.¹¹¹ In this ethic of "images," denial and sacrifice also play significant roles: not only must an individual now sacrifice himself for the sake of the family, but also must sacrifice his family for the sake of an image. Theresa Corcoran and Corky (then Jerome) are the victims of this process. Theresa may spend a number of afternoons knitting in the park, but "no one in this new and so strangely quiet and seemingly under-populated neighborhood was likely to approach her to exclaim, 'Well now, hello, isn't it a fine day?'"¹¹² The family continues to go to church in Irish Hill, and their son returns to play to their old neighborhood. Emotionally and socially, they feel deprived. Eventually, the move to Maiden

Vale proves to be the end of the family: the father, Tim Corcoran, is murdered because of his involvement in a power struggle with trade union leaders, and his refusal to pay them a bribe; and Theresa Corcoran becomes mentally ill and dies in hospital.

The Language of Housing

Although in Union City, flashy cars, expensive designer clothes, trophy wives and girlfriends and – last but not least – country club memberships and lunches with the “right people” are signs of achievement, houses in desirable neighborhoods still remain the ultimate statement of one’s good fortune. As Katherine Newman observes:

In the course of 1980s real estate became a language and a way of life. Dinner-party gossip revolved around how much houses on the block were going for and who was making a killing on what piece of property. It seemed and still seems to many in Pleasanton, [a town name to preserve anonymity] as though there was nothing else to talk about, nothing as captivating as money being made in the form of four-bedroom colonials.¹¹³

In *What I Lived For*, Oates endows the house with two kinds of meaning: first, in the traditional sense, as a symbol of welfare and the good life; and second, as a place of misery and entrapment in the postmodern era. The traditional ideal is reflected Corky’s parents’ understanding of the steady value of property, and the respect and traditional family values that are inherent in it. Oates questions this traditional meaning, however, as well as the ideal of the good life, in her portrayal of Corky’s mother’s isolation. In turn, she depicts Corky’s loneliness in his own house in the 1990s, reflecting Catherine Jurca’s argument that in the post-war novel, the suburban home has been depicted as “the double of the office, a site of, not a relief from, white-collar work – a castle perhaps, but one ruled by a nervous and unhappy king.”¹¹⁴ Corky limits his use of the rooms in his home to the office and bedroom. There is no separation between his work and his leisure time: Corky has no respite from his work, nor does he want time for himself.

In her portrayal of Corky and his relatives and associates as homeowners, Oates tries to capture the “ever-changing” definitions of the perfect 1990s lifestyle, as seen through the lens of the media- and celebrity-influenced culture of the American upper-middle classes. If traditionally, a house stands for the success and wealth of its owners, in contemporary

America, this does not necessarily have to be the case. Corky contemplates, “One thing you learn fast, in Corky’s trade, in fact Corky’d picked it up as a kid, nothing’s fixed or permanent or *real* in real estate. Everything’s location, context. Ever-changing.”¹¹⁵ Especially in Thalia’s case: despite being a millionaire’s granddaughter, Thalia lives in a half-dilapidated neighborhood. Since Corky is the product of both cultures – the ideal of steady economy versus the unpredictable world of the upper-middle classes – and has to outmaneuver his competitors, his character is by definition unstable, something that Oates expresses in the language of housing. Corky constantly measures his own value (that is, that of his property or his car) against that of others; he is the ultimate “other-directed” type, in Riesman’s sense. When he contemplates himself and his achievements from the perspective of his Irish background, he feels proud of his house, its vicinity, and his accomplishments:

33 Summit Avenue is two and a half miles south of 8 Schuyler Place. Both addresses are in Maiden Vale, but Corky’s house faces Summit Park, the largest park in Union City, acres of hilly wooded grassy land, the neoclassical marble temple that’s the Union City Museum of Fine Arts, the County Historical Museum, the prestigious Annandale Foundation for Medical Research, a number of landmark mansions some of which are no longer private homes but schools, headquarters for charities clinics. Corky Corcoran’s house is one of the smaller houses along the park but it’s classy, eye-catching – the bricks are the real thing, faded rose, beautiful, over a hundred years old not the sleek modern kind. A spectacular façade with half-circle portico, four slender white columns, white shutters on eight latticed windows. Slate roof. Circle drive. Three acre lot, prime property in Maiden Vale. Juniper pine, plane trees, Russian olive. The gorgeous hedge of blooming lilac. If Tim and Theresa could see, they’d be proud of him. Jerome did O.K. after all.¹¹⁶

When he is confronted with upper-middle-class WASPS, however, such as his ex-wife, his pride turns to insecurity and he depreciates the same house: “It pisses Corky *he’s* been left with that crap not to mention the fucking ‘Georgian Colonial’ in Maiden Vale Charlotte had to have, now on a lousy depressed market Corky’d be lucky to get \$500,000 for the property,

inside the city limits.”¹¹⁷ Yet, in another passage about his house, Corky claims that it has grown almost 200% in value over roughly 15 years. Therefore, his success is also relative.

In both cases, whether the house stands for traditional values or not, it forms part of a character’s image. It not only reveals someone’s income and social standing, but it also says something about the character’s way of life, personal choices, and social attitudes. The fact that Thalia has chosen “a street of shabby genteel houses in an area of all night laundromats, second hand bookstores and pizzerias”¹¹⁸ suggest a rebellion against the corrupt Union City élite, to which she herself belongs. The other girls in the novel, such as Kiki, live in “an apartment building of three floors, new-looking, moderately upscale, a young professionals/singles type of place, exactly where you would imagine an ambitious girl like Kiki to be living.”¹¹⁹ Uncle Sean, meanwhile, lives in a street with “old decent, two storey brick houses crammed in together on less-than-an acre lots.”¹²⁰ Oates uses the language of housing and property values to show how characters assess themselves or are assessed by others, describe what is happening in their lives, and highlight their plans for the future. When Corky wants to show to his lover, Christina Kavanaugh, that he is powerful and that he is worth something, he talks about buying “Griswold Building, a Union City landmark, designed by Louis Sullivan and built in 1917 as the first skyscraper ... in Upstate New York.”¹²¹ When Corky visits his ex-wife Charlotte, he immediately assesses how she is doing by contemplating the state of the house and the drive: “a house that does in fact look like a million bucks: split level contemporary stacked like a postmodernist wedding cake, white brick, fieldstone, glass walls, redwood deck.”¹²²

In *What I Lived For*, Oates also investigates how a house can come to represent alienation and misery, due to an absence of steady relationships and a focus on individual self-reliance. Oates’s narrative exposes a sense of alienation among post-industrial family members whose lives are marked with divorces, and feature adopted or surrogate children. Her characters are rich and own impressive villas (rather than identical suburban houses), but they lead forlorn lives. In the novel, loneliness is associated with vacant houses; misery and emptiness loom behind the Georgian Colonial and French Normandy façades. Although Corky, Charlotte and Ross Drummond radiate success in their everyday appearances, work, houses and cars, their large mansions are empty, and the rooms remain unlivied in. If success and respectability were also rooted in familial success (as used to be the case for the post-war generation), then these characters of the 1990s would also be

thought of as failures. Charlotte, for instance, married for the third time, cannot make up her mind whose wife she should be; her daughter Thalia declares her free from being a mother. Thalia is too preoccupied with planning revenge to have a relationship and start a family; Corky, meanwhile, never sired a child of his own.

Disappointed in their children, the post-war generation, represented by Ross Drummond and Oscar Slattery, look for successors in surrogates, such as Corky. Corky, in turn, finances his nephew's studies in the hope that he will be loyal to him. They lack an heir, "the son," who would continue to accumulate wealth, and who would inherit their values and their experience. That is why Ross Drummond looks ridiculous, half-utopian, as if he were from a fairy-tale world, when he sees Corky off at the end of the novel, possibly for the last time:

on the doorstep of the French Normandy mansion glistening in the rain and ludicrous in its outsized proportions as a painted house in a children's fairytale book, and the old man shrunken in height if not girth, staring after Corky Corcoran, that leathery face, that shiny-scaly scalp, that vacant death's grin.¹²³

Drummond does not stand a chance with his granddaughter, Thalia; she is so rebellious and angry that she might give away her millions when she inherits them, stripping Drummond's life of any meaning. Oates's reference to death in the quote above is a premonition of the next scene, in which Thalia tries to shoot Vic Slattery but instead hits Corky; that is, Drummond's granddaughter shoots his surrogate son and her stepfather.

An empty house becomes a burden and a reminder of bygone times; Corky's rooms are "a stage setting" without the actors. There is no point in buying furniture when a place is not lived in. Oates thus identifies another kind of upper-middle-class dislocation, a dislocation from family life that leads to restlessness and irresistible urges for bodily pleasures, in order to forget the empty void inside. After Corky has had sex with his ex-wife, he goes to sleep at a hotel, because he "couldn't go home. That big echoing house, never really his. A mausoleum."¹²⁴ So, while owning a house usually symbolizes a steady and happy family life, in Union City, after a few hours of intimacy, a house becomes a mausoleum, a house of the dead. Corky uses the same word to refer to the dilapidated station building, and it is also a reference to Mr. Teague's plan to build "a mausoleum of the local, deserving,

much mourned illustrious dead,”¹²⁵ even though the living can hardly make ends meet.

Thus, in Oates’s portrayal of American culture in the 1990s, a big and expensive house merely provides a façade of success, part of an image. One no longer has to earn respectability; it has been replaced with the image of success. If the characters do not feel at home in their own houses, if the hotel has become more of a home than a real house, the characters must be able to draw upon something that allows them to survive in this virtual-reality jungle of images. Corky’s Irish roots provide him with such support: his long-dead father, and his Irish relatives, especially Uncle Sean (and, what is more, this also contributes to his image as a popular politician).

Depicted against the background of the deteriorating city, the relationships in *What I Lived For* are – contrary to middle-class expectations – temporary in nature. While the nuclear family has traditionally formed the basis of middle-class life, Oates features many different sorts of families in her narrative, from families composed of two parents and children, to single parents and adopted children. Not one of the families of the 1990s fits the description of the nuclear family; either a parent or a child has left the picture, or mothers do not want to be mothers, or daughters release their mothers from their duties. In *What I Lived For*, Oates is claiming that in the 1990s, stable families no longer exist; at least, there are no complete families, with both parents and children. The last nuclear families were those of Corky’s parents’ generation, and now they only exist in Corky’s memories.

The failure of family life can also be traced back to the drive to be successful. Obsessed with the idea of power and the prospect of moving up the social ladder, Corky marries Charlotte, the disturbed daughter of an affluent WASP, who had “never had his kid like she’d promised.”¹²⁶ Now Corky dreams of having a child with his lover, Christina Kavanaugh. Oates shows that it is not Corky’s choice to remain childless; ironically, having had so many sexual encounters, he does not have a partner to have a child with. He is caught between two popular generational views: his parents’ belief in marriage, having children and caring for them, and the desire of the next generation to remain childless and free from familial responsibilities. According to Oates, trying to satisfy both sets of aspirations results in damage either to the individual, or to their next of kin.

The Meaning of Success: Corky’s Irish Roots

Corky’s Irish heritage offers him a possible escape route: through this, Oates gives Corky an opportunity to make peace with himself, and revisit the

story of his father's death. Oates chooses Memorial Day as the day of revelation and reflection: on this day, Corky discovers the truth about both his father's death and that of Marilee Plummer. Both of these important discoveries occur against a backdrop of imperialistic American politics, and the demonstration and celebration of military power. This moment in the action also forms the novel's climax. During the military parade and in the cemetery, Corky lowers his defenses and fears to listen to his uncle. This is the moment when Corky can be saved; he can either choose to continue with his life as before, or he can turn away from corruption, vanity, narcissism and degradation, rethink his individual goals and the meaning of success, and allow peace into his life. He is supposed to learn from his father's life and death; Oates suggests this by indicating that Tim Corcoran had been competing for popularity and power with his murderer, Fenske, and that it was his pride that cost him his life.

Corky is also tempted in another way. Oates draws a picture of him at his uncle's house, where he feels at home. Here Corky comes alive and carries out small repairs, fixings things in a way that he never feels like doing at home; Oates portrays him as "a born carpenter and handyman like Tim Corcoran, happiest at such times."¹²⁷ Indeed, "in his dreams he often visits"¹²⁸ this house, whereas he never dreams of his own house. The rats' nest that Corky finds in the attic of his Uncle Sean's house is also evocative of a home: a tight family nest, full of traditions. The things that are woven into the nest evoke a host of memories, both Corky's and those of his Irish family:

...basketball size, finely, and you could say lovingly woven, all these weird things together not just twine, string, rags, scraps of newspaper which you would expect but there were feathers and glittering wire and Christmas tinsel and half a dozen buttons and bits of colored glass and plastic and part of a child's rubber Donald Duck and badly tarnished silver medal on a delicate chain and a pair of broken wire eyeglasses and, most amazing of all, the metallic-phosphorescent face of the Big Ben alarm clock he and Pete had had in their room.¹²⁹

The sight of the nest affects both men. Seeing his late wife's religious medal, Uncle Sean becomes alert "for the first time in Corky's recent memory."¹³⁰ It is like seeing a quilt that has been sewn out of pieces of clothing once owned by close relatives and friends, or a photo album that brings back long-lost memories of people and events. At the same time, it is a confronta-

tion with an organized family life in the natural world, amid the loneliness and destruction of families in the civilized world. Moreover, it is a house, built from things that embody a lifetime of meaning; the kind of highly-individualized home that is no longer available to upper-middle-class families. In this way, Oates contrasts the resourcefulness of nature with the rootlessness and meaninglessness of human beings, in their drive to build houses and districts that lack any organic relationship with their surroundings:

Pendle Hill Village is one of those townhouse-style condominiums built in the 1980s in ‘gentrified’ islands in the downtown sector you’d have written off as dead-end zones in the 1970s. ... Only a few blocks from St Vincent’s Mission on Front Street where the winos line up three times a day for free meals and the occasional delousing. Less than a mile from that stretch of Canal Street the downscale pimps have staked out for their hookers. Still, it looks swanky. Yuppie-swanky. Each condo unit with its own front entrance and the garage below; all buff beige brick and curvy wrought-iron railings and red geraniums in clay pots. And bars on the lower windows so classy you might not guess their practical purpose. Synthetic like a movie set but with a look of romance: a village for well-paid young professionals, computer programmers, lawyers, money people, PR and media girls, a swinging-singles kind of condo it would have been in the crude happy innocent days before AIDS.¹³¹

Pendle Hill Village stands for new forms of cultural expression. Despite being attractive and new, these forms are devoid of meaning and authenticity; they are “synthetic”, “sterile” and uniform, in contrast to the older houses and districts of the city. Indeed, the adjectives that Oates uses to denote these older houses refer to the nationalities and countries of the old continent: the “German” neighborhood, “Irish Hill,” a “French Normandy façade.” Many of these neighborhoods or houses have been demolished or forgotten. By this, Oates implies that while the new generation has discarded old forms, the new culture remains dissatisfying and unfulfilling. The same process is mirrored in the novel’s characters: most of them are unable to find appropriate ways in which to express themselves, so they either adopt a passive existence of carnal pleasures, or they attempt to imitate those others who, in their eyes,

have “made it.” Even though they dwell in very distinguished, customized villas, they find it difficult to persuade themselves that they are successful.

Despite being a hard drinker and an eccentric, Oates depicts Uncle Sean as the one character who does not lose his judgment, and does not chase the image of success. In Oates’s view, he is the one person who values the past and the notion of an ordinary life. He is Corky’s savior in the novel; both in the past, when he raised him as his own son, and now, when he discloses the final secrets about Tim Corcoran’s death and the Slatterys. However, having been tempted by a life of virtue, Corky chooses the negative path. His desire to live the life of a celebrity, and his need to be liked and appreciated, wins in the end.

Although the characters perceive their lower-class Irish roots as obstacles to success, Oates suggests that instead, it is namely from such roots that a successful life can emerge. Although the book includes many pejorative statements about the Irish, such as “the Irish are the niggers of Great Britain” and “the Irish used to be the niggers of Union City, shit on the WASP shoes,”¹³² suggesting tensions between WASPs and other ethnic groups, these tensions originate from a combination of economic, religious and ethnic factors, rather than pure racism. To quote Julie Sheridan’s summary: “Plummer, Steadman and Corky are all casualties of corrupt political forces. Plummer was used by the Slatterys (and Corky’s allies) as an expendable pawn in a conspiracy to discredit Steadman.”¹³³ The same people that were responsible for Corky’s father’s death in a dispute over corrupt corporate and trade union practices, are now his friends – Buck Glover and the Slatterys. At the end of the narrative, when Corky discovers that his friends and allies were involved in Plummer’s death and his father’s murder, he thinks to himself, “*Just walk out of here. You don’t even need to denounce them.*”¹³⁴ Yet, he stays.

Oates leaves the ending of *What I Lived For* open. The main part of the narrative concludes with Corky being shot and falling down on the floor. This is followed with an epilogue, in which Oates pictures Corky in hospital, floating in and out of consciousness, receiving guests and flowers. Oates describes the scene in a hallucinatory manner, creating confusion between reality and Corky’s delirium. The epilogue ends with a date and time – “May 28, 1992, 4.43 A.M.”¹³⁵ – which may indicate the time of Corky’s death. Some critics, like Gavin Cologne Brookes, suggest that Corky dies and that his “death, like his father’s turns out, is self willed, … because the way he has lived his life is a slow suicide.”¹³⁶ Yet it is the epilogue that gives the most cynical twist to Oates’s story of success and failure. The last guest that

Corky receives is Mr. Teague, who raises money for the mausoleum of the “much mourned illustrious dead,”¹³⁷ and who has been sitting “out in the corridor to see him for days, weeks, God knows how long he’s been waiting for what he’s got in that briefcase to show Corky...”¹³⁸ I suggest that Mr. Teague, with his morbid projects, represents the devil himself, waiting for Corky to sell him his soul. By depicting the end of Corky’s life in this way, Oates could be indicating that she sees this as the end of an era of near-apocalyptic corruption in politics and business. However, the narrative does not suggest this; Corky Corcoran’s life may be over, but his death does not signal the end of decadence, for there will always be people like Corky and the Slatterys. With a view to the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter, I instead conclude that *What I Lived For* is Oates’s reworking of the theme of the Fall and its adaptation to modern America, as represented in the corrupt and decadent Union City.

Chapter 3

Anesthetized Life: Middle Age and Authenticity

Like *What I Lived For* and *We Were The Mulvanneys*, *Middle Age: A Romance*¹ focuses on the dilemmas of upper- and middle-class American life. Inspired by the Princeton community in which Oates lives, the novel is a tragicomic tale about the importance of searching for new meaning in life, especially when one is approaching retirement age. Oates suggests that traditional American values, such as the Protestant work ethic and the pursuit of success cannot in themselves bring about personal fulfillment. The characters in this novel experience intense boredom, owing to their feelings of disconnection from the wider world, and their failure to revise personal goals and pursue new dreams. They feel “dead” and “anesthetized,” and are “dying of a lack of perspective.” Not one of the characters considers the future until a mutual friend dies, and the loss has the effect of awakening their desire to live.

In this chapter, which analyzes *Middle Age: A Romance*, I will focus on the idea that upper-class life has lost its meaning, and how this loss of meaning is depicted in Oates’s narrative. The opposite of “meaning,” of course, is meaninglessness, and I will refer to this term as both “ennui” and “boredom,” on the grounds that these concepts often mean the same thing in modern contexts² and are used synonymously. Still, the concept of boredom in this novel has two dimensions, which overlap for a large part: first, existential boredom, or the sensation of a “void”; and second, the boredom that arises when a person is trapped by a particular situation, or by social and personal circumstances, customs, and cultural and class boundaries. In the novel, the causes of boredom are closely intertwined with factors such as characters’ personalities, human nature, isolation, upper- and middle-class values, the Protestant work ethic, and, in particular, fear of failure and of overstepping class boundaries. This chapter analyzes how Oates incorporates these factors into her narrative, and how this relates to the social context and ideology of late-20th century America.

The word “boredom” is just one of the many common words that denote phenomena with which most of us are familiar, even though we might find

them difficult to define. Writers and philosophers, among others, have suggested a range of definitions, and over time, “boredom” has become known by a number of terms that, if not exactly synonyms, have similar meanings: acedia, ennui, melancholy, tedium, spleen, listlessness, stolidity, lethargy, and so forth. Different concepts, in fact, reflect different understandings of boredom during different historical epochs or among different social groups. For example, the term “acedia”³ refers to the spiritual version of boredom that was experienced by early Christian monks. Since the Middle Ages, meanwhile, “ennui” has come to mean either “deep spiritual distress” or “a bother and a slight irritation.”⁴ “Melancholy,” an influential concept in medieval and Renaissance thought, can be traced back to Aristotle. The latter thought that bodily fluid, “the black bile” or the “black gall,” determined the melancholic nature of politicians, poets and artists. Those affected could act in cold, unfeeling, suicidal, or cruel ways. Most important was melancholy’s effect on “the creative process”: it could “lead to artistic sterility,” or it could inspire an artist to create.⁵ The word “spleen” was used during the Age of Enlightenment to denote boredom. Reinhard Kuhn finds evidence that in this period, “spleen serves as the source of inspiration for both the religious and the artistic experience,”⁶ in addition to indicating a condition of utter distress. At the end of the 20th century, scholars writing on boredom often used the prosaic term “boredom,” retaining these two opposite meanings: first, as a force of devastation; and second, as a creative force.

Blaise Pascal, one of the earliest theoreticians of boredom, understood boredom to be a sometimes-positive aspect of human life. He believed that boredom is “an essential characteristic of man as such. Without God man is nothing, and boredom is the awareness of this nothingness. Those who encounter their own boredom therefore have far greater self-perception than those who seek diversions.”⁷ Since Pascal’s time, boredom has remained a topic of philosophical interest. A number of philosophers and writers – including Voltaire, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Flaubert, Mann, and Dostoyevsky, to mention but a few – have occupied themselves with the concept.

Although “meaninglessness” was not a dominant theme in 19th-century American society, whilst traveling in America, Alexis de Tocqueville “saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest circumstances that the world affords, it seemed to me [him] as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brow, and I [he] thought them serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures.”⁸ Having noticed the signs of melancholy in the faces of well-off Americans, he assigned these to endless “brooding over advantages they do

not possess.” A number of authors, including Kuhn, Tocqueville, and Christopher Lasch, suggest that the origins of ennui can be traced to a loss of belief in higher truths, and the rise of consumer culture. We will see that Oates locates the causes of boredom in a combination of factors, including isolation and exclusion, upper-class traditionalism, Protestant ethics, and individualism. She also feels that there is a need for a narrative that gives context to the present, linking it to the past and envisioning future possibilities.

“In the twentieth century ennui is not one theme among others; it is the dominant theme, and, like a persistent obsession it intrudes upon the works of most contemporary authors,”⁹ writes Reinhard Kuhn in *The Demon of Noon-tide: Ennui in Western Literature*. Kuhn believes that with modernity, man has lost his faith in higher truths, “and all that is left is the anguish that comes from the feeling of no longer being able to find any values.” Christopher Lasch, meanwhile, blames the media for the “void within.” According to Lasch, the media “give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory,” and “encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the herd.” Cultivating such unrealistic expectations in ordinary people results in “fleeting and insubstantial” love affairs, and personal relationships that are based on the “reflected glory” of celebrities. Since consumer culture has created the idea that everything is possible, and that every wish can be gratified immediately, there is no place or support for failure and loss.¹⁰ Andrew Delbanco suggests that modern man has lost hope in a society that is governed by “consumer culture,” and in which details have often become more important than things themselves. “In such a world, it is impossible to distinguish foreground from background or the spurious from the authentic.”¹¹

Although boredom may have a negative impact on people’s well-being, both Svendsen and Kuhn suggest that boredom is part of our lives. It is not something that we are supposed to overcome, but rather, something that we must learn to live with:

Let us not forget, however, that boredom, despite everything, is only one aspect of existence. Everything else does not deserve to be reduced to simply representing the boring or the interesting ... It springs from a lack of meaning, but such a lack cannot guarantee that there is something that can fill it in.¹²

Indeed, Joseph Brodsky encourages celebrating those moments when boredom strikes. In his 1989 commencement address at Dartmouth College, he urges:

...boredom is your window on time, on those properties of it one tends to ignore to the likely peril of one's mental equilibrium. In short, it is your window on time's infinity, which is to say, on your own insignificance in it. ...

Once this window opens, don't try to shut it; on the contrary, throw it wide open. For boredom speaks the language of time, and it is to teach you the most valuable lesson in your life ... the lesson of your utter insignificance.¹³

According to Brodsky, realizing our insignificance in the vast infinity of time is an important means of helping us to maintain our humanity, and of counterbalancing the romantic ideals of absolute freedom, independence and self-importance that are often dominant in western societies. Lars Svendsen makes a similar observation, namely that when traditional structures that give meaning to pre-modern societies disappear, the individual and self-realization assume increasing importance. Focusing on the self and on the various everyday trivialities associated with it, it is easy to lose sight of the “bigger picture” and of significant factors that might lead to fulfillment. For example, for Abigail Des Pres in *Middle Age: A Romance*, organizing or attending yet another luncheon becomes a “lifesaving suburban mission.”¹⁴ Eventually, the individual comes to feel that he or she is missing something, and that life lacks meaning and is filled with feelings of emptiness. This, in turn, leads the individual to experience boredom. So, according to Svendsen, “boredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied.”¹⁵ His phrase, “lack of personal meaning,” which he understands to be a cause of boredom, encompasses both the individual and the existential aspects of the concept.

In Andrew Delbanco’s view, failing to have a vision of the future can lead to feelings of melancholy. Like Joyce Carol Oates, he thinks that “we live in an age of unprecedented wealth, but in the realm of narrative and symbol, we are deprived. And so the ache for meaning goes unrelieved.”¹⁶ In the past, Christian belief (the promise of rewards after death) and the idea of creating a united nation composed of equal and free individuals gave Americans hope for the future, and ensured that ideals remained greater than individuals. In the modern era, with its focus on the individual, such stories and inspiring

ideals no longer exist. People who are engaged in “interchangeable products of the marketplace” seek immediate gratification of their desires, and do not transgress the boundaries of the self. Andrew Delbanco believes that today, we are unable “to turn physical pleasure into a metaphor of something more enduring.” This creates a void in us and makes us melancholic, which for Delbanco is the “absence or diminution of hope.”¹⁷

Robert Bellah is another cultural critic and sociologist whose vision of the meaning of life is similar to that of Oates. In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah asserts that while many Americans might be happy that their lives consist of two realms – those of work, and leisure spent with “a group of sympathetic people” – this does not mean that everyone finds such an arrangement satisfying. Like Joyce Carol Oates, he perceives that:

... [a] life composed mainly of work that lacks much intrinsic meaning and leisure devoted to golf and bridge does have limitations. It is hard to find a story or narrative, as of a pilgrimage or quest, that many cultures have used to link private and public; present, past and future; and the life of the individual to the life of society and the meaning of cosmos.¹⁸

This “crisis of meaning” has been expressed in a number of ways. In late-20th century American social and cultural criticism, there is growing concern that in the world of the media and pop culture, people are tending to fight feelings of emptiness by turning to antidepressant medication. The Prozac brand has become a metaphor for various serotonin-based drugs. Michael Moore, the controversy-seeking film director, has drawn links between school shootings and the side-effects of Prozac¹⁹ that, according to Moore, include oversensitive reactions, euphoria, psychosis, and aggression in children. The UK-based *Daily Mail*²⁰ worries about the health of children who have been prescribed antidepressants, following parents’ concerns about their ability to deal with school pressures. The response of the younger generation, meanwhile, finds expression in the music of the Italian pop group Arcadia, a band that describes itself as a mentally insane, violent “creature.”²¹ The group’s song, “Prozac Generation,” pictures an anemic, “contorted,” “distorted,” colorless and fading image of “me” in juxtaposition with a list of existing and imagined drug brands, including Novocaine, Roipnol, Seroxat and Lexotan. In fact, “Prozac Generation” is not just a song title; it is a term that is often used by the media to refer to a whole generation of people who

need a “quick fix,” have no time to rest, and are looking for ways to deal with their existential fears.

While Prozac is hailed as a universal cure-all for “existential maladies,” according to a number of accounts by ex-users,²² the drug both diverts people from their problems and leaves them dependent. As a symbol of the emptiness at the heart of modern life, the desire to feel good, and our attempts to hide our failure to do so, the drug also features in Oates’s narratives. In *Middle Age: A Romance*, Prozac serves to help people forget their momentary frustrations and anxieties and, when taken with Vodka, offers a means of suicide.

Thus, even if we are not ourselves suffering from boredom, we are still confronted with the phenomenon in newspaper headlines drawing attention to bored teenagers’ problems; we encounter it on Internet forums; and in news items and opinion pieces in the quality press. We also see that in literature, boredom is an ever-shifting concept that assumes different functions in works of fiction. P.M. Spacks, for instance, believes that “the most characteristic postmodern imaginative use of boredom is not as a fictional subject but as fictional atmosphere.”²³ There are numerous examples in fiction where boredom is depicted as a form of paralysis (James Joyce, *Dubliners*); paralysis as the result of isolation (Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*); extreme violence (B.E. Ellis, *American Psycho*); demonic force (F. Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed*); promiscuity (R. Moody, *The Ice Storm*), creativity (J.C. Oates *Middle Age: A Romance*), and so forth. While paralysis is an expression of boredom, violence, obsession, promiscuity and creativity are actions that are induced by extreme boredom. Pat Bateman, the protagonist in B.E. Ellis’s *American Psycho*, is so immersed in looks, designer brands, shades of ties, complexions, cosmetics and gourmet foods that he has to indulge in stimulating substances, perversity and murder in order to feel alive.

In Oates’s works, boredom is disguised by medical or behavioral disorders. Her characters are “anesthetized,” and later regain their creativity (*Middle Age: A Romance*); narcissistically closed in on themselves (for example, Elena in *Do What You Will*); or are plagued by anxieties, restlessness and obsessions (for example, Corky in *What I Lived For*). Means of suppressing boredom often relate to obsessions with food, youth or promiscuity. Oates’s work suggests that she perceives boredom to be part of life, even though some of its expressions can be life-threatening. For the characters of *Middle Age*, boredom is mainly caused by their inability to express their individuality, due to their perception that they must conform to the strict norms and lifestyle choices imposed by their class. In turn, this tension between the

hidden desire for self-expression and the restraints imposed by society is reflected in the structure of the novel.

Structure and Classical Tragedy

Middle Age: A Romance is structured in two layers, reflecting its characters' double lives: in public, with their friends, and at social gatherings, these people project happy, affluent, self-reliant images; while in private, they feel miserable and "dead" inside, like "embalmed corpses." These two worlds, private and public, are so far apart that they hardly seem to be connected. On the one hand, Oates has written a light, romantic, satirical tale about youthful-looking, middle-aged people who are enjoying their privileged lives; and on the other, she draws on the form of a Greek tragedy in order to reveal these characters' clandestine and tragic natures. In addition, she makes numerous allusions and references to Greek and Roman mythology and philosophy, contrasting the meaningfulness of the classical era with a modern world that is governed by consumer culture and individuals' narcissistic desires.

The novel is composed of a prologue and three parts, in which all of the characters appear in turn to tell their stories from their own points of view. Both in terms of rhythm and of substance, the style of the prologue reminds us of the *Prologos* and *Parados* in Greek tragedy:

IS THIS FAIR? You leave your home in Salthill-on-Hudson on the muggy afternoon of July Fourth for a cookout (an invitation you didn't really want to accept, but somehow accepted) and return days later as ashes in a cheesy-looking funeral urn: bone chunks and chips and coarse gritty powder to be dumped out, scattered, and raked in the crumbly soil of your garden.
Fertilizer for weeds.²⁴

The "chorus," which addresses the main character as "you" and predicts how the events of the novel will unfold, speaks in prose stanzas that are interrupted by the monologue of the main character, Adam Berendt. Just like the *Parados* of a Greek tragedy, the chorus introduces the main character, describes the fatal accident, and sheds light on the context and setting of the action of the novel. The main character, as in the *Prologos*, introduces the main themes that will be encountered in the following three parts of the narrative (personal meaning, identity and personality). His prose stanzas

consist of short sentences, the disconnected phrases capturing the gist of his life:

NOT WHERE I was born, which I've long forgotten. Or where I would die, which I would not know. But where I lived, *where I was known*. The village of Salthill-on-Hudson, New York. Where by a sustained act of will through twenty-one years I created ADAM BERENDT as you might fumble a human, or humanoid, figure out of such materials as clay, earth, dung. Rotted wood and driftwood, salvaged from the river. Bits of glass, plastic. Crude materials to be shaped by crude fingers.²⁵

The fact that Oates calls the prologue “Fourth of July,” and draws parallels with Greek tragedy, reveals her own belief in the importance of independence and personal authenticity, and the value of emotions and passions. When in possession of these, a person can feel complete and need not hide in misery in the private sphere. She also seeks to expose the dramatic – or even tragic – events that can follow the loss of such authenticity. The personality, the self and the meaning of one’s life have to be constantly created and recreated by a “sustained act of will,” just as Adam Berendt created his self. Otherwise, the novel asserts, tragedy will occur. Oates emphasizes how easily one can give up one’s self and slip into an “anesthetized,” comfortable and ultimately destructive existence. Loss of the self, coupled with the resulting loss of personal initiative, leaves individuals stripped of their desires and passions, and allows for feelings of emptiness or “void,” as Owen Cutler puts it. This novel is a modern tragedy of upper-class meaninglessness and indifference. Oates also uses the novel to counter the general assumption that if you are rich, you must be happy, meaning that no tragedy is possible among the rich. In an interview with Ramona Koval,²⁶ Oates asserts that “affluent people … can be tragic people too.”

Having introduced this theme in the prologue, Oates then elaborates it in the three parts of the narrative, using seven characters for this purpose. These characters are of equal standing: none is given more attention nor considered to be more interesting than the others. Each takes his or her turn to narrate: in Part I, the death of Adam Berendt spurs the characters to reconsider their lives; in Part II, they embark on personal quests; and in Part III, we see all of the characters demonstrating what they have achieved. Gavin Cologne-Brookes compares this sequential narrative technique with a ballet performance in which “each character or a couple are given their time in the spot-

light.”²⁷ One could also compare it with a (tragic) play, in which a succession of characters appears on stage to deliver monologues or dialogues.

Merely implicitly linking her narrative to Ancient Greek culture is not enough for Oates: she insists on a physical likeness between her “dead” character, Adam Berendt, and Socrates, an “ordinary seeming ugly-burly man,”²⁸ indifferent to wealth and money. She also makes Berendt a “teacher,” a follower of Socrates who, by using Socratic techniques, inspires the other characters to “know themselves” and to find meaning in their lives. Moreover, for the title for parts I and II, Oates uses the answer that Socrates gave to his pupils when they asked him how he would like to be buried. Socrates is alleged to have said, “How you like... if you catch me and I don’t escape you,” meaning that the dead body is only a body and not the human being Socrates any longer. Part I is thus entitled, “If You Catch Me...,” while Part II is called, “...And I Don’t Escape You.” This suggests that these cryptic titles reveal the novel’s core message: namely, if you find out who you are, and you manage to live without losing sight of this “self,” then you will have a more fulfilling life than most of the characters in the novel. Finding and retaining the desire to live could ensure happiness ever after. Indeed, Part III could be considered to be an *Exodus*: this concluding chapter, which is entitled “Ever After” and amounts to less than 40 pages, briefly revisits all of the characters after they have found their “selves” and have (at least temporarily) found new meaning in their lives.

It is interesting to note that although the novel is described as a “romance,” there is very little real romance in it; in fact, most of the love stories consist of anti-romantic affairs, as I show in chapter five of this thesis. During a reading from *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*²⁹ in California, Oates said that she thought of the romance as a love story “which is so different when people are middle-aged.” However, the depiction of these love stories is far from serious: there is no romance in the sense of an ephemeral love story, nor is there an “emotionally satisfying ending.” The “princesses” who are admired by Lionel Hoffmann and Roger Cavanagh, two middle-aged, well-off Salthill men, turn out to be a call-girl and an edgy, vain feminist. Lionel is rejected and is then killed, while Roger buys his child from its incapable mother. Abigail Des Pres agrees to marry a man out of her delusional love for his daughter. The poet who had experienced past adoration is now cynical, incontinent, and impotent as the result of prostate cancer. These are certainly not idealized heroes.

Above all, this narrative is a satire that aims to expose the naïveté, narrow-mindedness, emotional immaturity, emotional impotence, and hypocrisy

of Salthill's residents. Oates creates satire by shifting the tone from slight irony to sarcasm, and back to irony, while her language is replete with grotesque similes and metaphors. Oates writes, for instance, that "the faces were cracking like cheap crockery";³⁰ the jewels "wink as semaphore signals";³¹ "Augusta's eyes were dilated, blazing like Christmas lights";³² the men "brandish the tokens of a lost, lamented manhood, two of them unwrapped cigars, the other an unlit pipe."³³ Lionel and Camille Hoffmann's marriage is "an expensive burrow marriage from which oxygen had leaked, leaving the air humid and stale."³⁴ Men and women are shown to be impotent in a number of scenes. Those who are led by passion, however, such as the cool-headed, "unsentimental as a guillotine" lawyer, Roger Cavanagh, are abused by devious women. In a way, the jocular and ironic tone helps to break down the barrier between the "cosmetic mask" of people's public images, and their "quiet desperation" in private.

Boredom in the Novel's Setting

As in *The Magic Mountain*, boredom is integral to the narrative of *Middle Age: A Romance* in two ways: first, it is an invisible force that causes events and is present in the locale itself; and second, it stimulates the characters' actions in both a constructive and a destructive manner. Boredom is almost tangible in the atmosphere of Salthill, the town in which *Middle Age* is set; it is as if an invisible mist has cloaked its residents' movements, and even enshrouded the houses and streets. This lethargic atmosphere combines with Salthill's past, historic buildings and surroundings to determine the characters' way of life: they feel obliged to live up to the standards that they imagine suit such a place, while at the same time sinking into ever-deeper isolation from the rest of society. The town is also reminiscent of a sanatorium, such as the Berghof Sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain*,³⁵ a place that has become a world in itself, sustains no relations with its surroundings, and which serves one sole purpose: to maintain the same pace of life, day-in, day-out. Like the Berghof, life in Salthill does not present any challenges: its residents stay there, comfortable and totally provided for, entertaining themselves and their friends.

In Salthill, life is dictated by "Custom" (with a capital "C"). While middle-aged men commute to work in Manhattan, their wives (note that their children have grown up) keep themselves busy with luncheons, charities and parties, in a manner similar to that of life in the Berghof Sanatorium (that is, long and copious meals, a couple of short walks, rest, and the occasional lecture delivered by one of the doctors). Every day seems to be the same as

the one before. On the surface, nothing is wrong: the characters enjoy youthful good looks, are rich and happy, live in mansions, live a life of freedom – the American Dream has indeed come true in Salthill. An outsider, the poet Donegal Croom, who comes to read his poetry at a charity event, comments that Salthill-on-Hudson is “the warm bath that leaves you waterlogged and dopey and uncertain – uncaring? – if alive, or dead.”³⁶ In the course of the novel, the inhabitants themselves – as if waking up – first admit, later insist, and eventually scream, that they are “dead” inside. The town is “anesthetized” according to the local artists, Marina Troy and Adam Berendt.

Salthill-on-Hudson, which is based on a prototype of Princeton (where Oates herself lives), is a quintessential, exclusive, American upper-class commuter town. Even though the name Salthill alludes to the biblical story of Lot and his wife who was turned into a pillar of salt, in the narrative salt signifies absence of life and stagnation rather than punishment for sins unless disengagement from life is a sin. Although Oates makes no reference to surrounding walls and gates, her portrayal of the town is very close to that of a gated community, a privileged fortress that ensures the safety and homogeneity of its inhabitants. As far as family is concerned, these people seem to have completed that period of life in which blood-related family plays a central role: “now that their children had departed, in middle age they require another family, a more expansive and in a way more reliable family, close at hand, sociable as they, intimate without being familiar...”³⁷ The people with whom they socialize – “their circle” – become vitally important to them, and naturally not everyone can be included. Preserving the quality of the circle necessitates extremely careful selection. The ironic sentence (italicized by Oates), “*We love Salthill because it’s a true American melting pot,*” exposes the process of selection lying behind the imaginary “melting pot.” Salthillians take extensive precautions in order to avoid becoming such a “melting pot”:

Salthill-on-Hudson has been able to afford costly litigation to preserve its heritage; to block developers’ efforts to break zoning codes. There are local lawyers who have made fortunes successfully bringing suits against the federal and state and county governments, blocking interstate connections and the widening and improvement of state highways; blocking subsidized housing units; senior citizen’s units; a mega-million-dollar biotech research park (“Green warfare experiments in our midst”), new sewers, paved country roads, medical clinics,

a branch of the state university; additional public schools; even new nature trails with facilities for the handicapped.³⁸

Salthill's inhabitants have created their dream community: it contains no undesirable classes or groups, and no technological or cultural institutions. Instead, it is populated solely by reliable individuals (like themselves), who live in similar houses, wear the same brand of clothes, drive the same kinds of cars, eat at the same restaurants, belong to the same country clubs, and fall in love with the same individuals. All that is disagreeable and unattractive has been kept beyond the invisible walls. At the same time, everything that makes life stimulating, thought-provoking, or simply exciting has also been kept outside Salthill-on Hudson.

The undesirables include the New Money families, the newcomers to the upper classes. In *Middle Age: A Romance*, Oates writes that Salthill's inhabitants view the "high-rise condominiums and \$2-million tract homes"³⁹ of the "*nouveaux riches*"⁴⁰ with distrust, and imagine themselves to be a cut above the rest. New Money stands for the free market and for profit, not for history, tradition and patrimony. In this sense, the *nouveaux riches* are threatening to invade the last bastions of Old Money: Salthillians already notice a "dismaying number"⁴¹ of them in the clubs. To distinguish themselves from these undesirables, they use the term "suburbanite" to refer to the *nouveaux riches*, a common variety of well-off Americans; for themselves, they prefer terms such as "village-dwelling, or country dwelling," as "they thought of themselves as very different, another type of American entirely."⁴² This attitude corresponds with the findings of Michèle Lamont, who has researched upper-class American and French culture. She writes that those American interviewees whose families have belonged to the upper-middle class for three generations – that is, who are "solidly entrenched" in it – are very particular about cultural attitudes and how these are lacking in newcomers. They tend to exclude *nouveaux riches* on cultural grounds:

...third generation members are more likely to adopt very specific norms concerning what is acceptable and what is not. In other words, they function within a tightly bounded system that governs a wide range of cultural preferences, from the type of car one should buy, to one's taste in clothes. Accordingly, these individuals frequently say that they despise vulgarity and bad manners and greatly appreciate charm and intelligence. Some exercise their exclusivism against nouveau riche and

against people who are acquiring high culture too rapidly, with too much purposefulness, or with the implicit assumption that they can buy their way into it.⁴³

Another expert and upper-class insider, Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr., thinks that the explanation for sneering at New Money can be found in the desire to protect memories, not only of a family but of the whole class (since the class *is* often the family). New Money families are frequently viewed as “barbarians” who want to intrude on the most hallowed and private aspects of the family:

Old Money’s exclusivists want to protect these deeply intimate treasures [memories], as well as more public ones, from the rising flood. Their most characteristic anxiety is the anxiety of violated privacy, for their memories are family memories. New Money, they imagine, is sensual, prurient money, and it wants to join the family. It wants, in the familiar phrase, to marry one’s daughter. ... The ‘family’ metaphor for the class, in other words, must be understood as being itself a metaphor for the ‘race’ of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.⁴⁴

Thus when New Money families build their villas in Salthill, the circle feels threatened and intruded upon. While Oates is suggesting a tension between Old and New Money, however, this tension does not result in any activities in the village. In a sense, New Money stands for something new, for the future, for new developments that the Salthillians must reject because “the enemy is change, the enemy is ‘progress’—‘profit.’”⁴⁵

Such exclusive communities – “gated communities,” even though they might lack actual walls and gates – have received a lot of negative press. The main criticism has been that a democratic society should strive for equality among its citizens, and not for exclusivity for certain groups. After all, “equality” is one of the key concepts⁴⁶ in the American Creed:

Perceived exclusion – whether because of race, gender, class, or activity – is as socially significant as the physical barrier. In the public domain, exclusionary practices are illegal, regardless of whether the issue is access to public space like a park or beach or access to housing. In the realm of private communities and private parks, these rules do not apply. That is why so

many gated communities in the news are characterized as exclusive, fortresslike, racist, or elitist. In a heterogeneous, democratic society ostensibly struggling to eliminate inequality, symbols of exclusion carry inordinate emotional and political weight.⁴⁷

Setha Low, an anthropologist who lived in gated communities while observing and interviewing other residents, found that these communities limited personal freedom and forced individuals to become isolated. She thinks that most people choose to live behind such gates because they symbolically “ward off many of life’s unknowns, including unemployment, loss of loved ones, and downward mobility,” while promising security and suggesting prestige. In Oates’s narrative, fear of aging takes central place among “life’s unknowns”. The notion of progress is inseparable from the passing of time, while Salthill’s residents wish to stop time and to remain young. Their attempts to control progress – starting with zoning, and finishing with the natural bodily process of aging – seem to have reached such a height that the entire town has become stuck in time. “The whole book has the feeling of being an artifact of another era,” writes Claire Dederer, in her review of the book for *The New York Times*.⁴⁸ Dederer finds the characters old-fashioned, as if the narrative were set in the 1950s rather than in the 1990s. One of the characters, Augusta Cutler, on return from her quest to the West, is surprised to see “how small, how precious, how privileged, how locked in time, like a smart, fashionable watch ticking with self-importance, yet not true importance” Salthill is.⁴⁹ Indeed, Setha Low concludes that exclusion from the rest of the society negatively affects feelings of happiness, for example by increasing inhabitants’ anxieties. In the end, the drive for self-determination is overpowered by the rules and regulations that are intended to preserve the community’s purity. “Security wins, and the residents end up in secure isolation and rules,” explains Low. Nothing unexpected happens, and the lack of new ideas leads to boredom and meaninglessness. Furthermore, for those outside the walls, the feeling of rejection is further enhanced:

Civic engagement and social connectedness also declined over the last thirty years; Americans are now less trustful and more isolated. Gated communities are not the cause or even indirectly the result of these societal changes, but they amplify these tendencies, further reducing the possibilities of social interac-

tion between people, and the symbiosis between city and suburb.⁵⁰

In addition to the image of a “warm bath,” a mischievous symbol that suggests comfort as well as tedium, Oates also employs a powerful image of a cave, which evokes the secluded character of the Salthill way of life and the biased mindset of its inhabitants. In the chapter entitled “Old Mill Way: The Cave,” Oates introduces us to the Hoffmanns, who live in a “meticulously restored eighteenth century Colonial house”⁵¹: a “showcase home”⁵² for the public, and a “burrow” for the owners’ feeling. The Hoffmanns, Abigail Des Pres, the Cutlers, and even Marina Troy, all live in the symbolic cave that is Salthill, and as in Plato’s cave, they watch the shadows of real life on its walls. These “shadows” are echoes of each person’s private past, the people they were before they came to Salthill: for Lionel Hoffmann, it is the shocking discovery of dead hippies when he was a child, the first intrusion by the real world into a protected suburb; for Marina Troy, it is her previous life as an artist, which she gave up too easily; for females, the professions of teachers and dancers; for males, alternative careers. Governed by “Custom” with a capital “C,” which stands for “good breeding and good money though not a showy excess of money, on both sides of the marriage,”⁵³ the characters, in their dissatisfaction, do not attempt to leave the cave in order to see what is outside, but instead try to change the cave from the inside while remaining in isolation:

Strange! – that the burrow, the house, was spacious and much admired and very expensive on four acres of Prime Rockland County real estate, and yet remained a burrow. Strange that it was so confining and airless, though the present owners as well as previous owners had expended it, and refurbished it, and spent a good deal of money making it a showcase.⁵⁴

As with Plato’s cave, those who have seen the outside world – that is, those who have changed and found new meaning in their lives – are no longer accepted by friends from their “circle.” Among the former are Camille Hoffmann, who causes one of the rare “public-commotion scenes” at the library while defending her dogs, and Owen Cutler, who speaks about his emotions openly to his friends. Such “careless” behavior calls for embarrassment, if not condemnation, among the fearful cave-dwellers. Abigail Des Pres, for example, is a cave-dweller who, in her depressed and delusional

state of mind, is desperate to experience “real” emotions and relationships. She is unable to recognize those relationships, however, and to face her reality and open up to others. In a similar way, Lionel Hoffmann must remain a prisoner in the “cave” after he resists enlightenment, remains delusional about everlasting youth, and seeks rebirth via an adulterous relationship with a call-girl.

The locale of Salthill thus has two meanings: it is both a protected place where one can live safely among the people one trusts, and a place of stagnation. Judging from the way that Oates envisions the options that are open to her characters, leaving Salthill means either recovery and discovery of one’s authenticity and meaning; or death, if the choice is not grounded in honest motives. Descriptions of rough American landscapes and the “enormous sky overhead” evoke feelings of being in touch with something real, rather than something that has been refined and processed by civilization. Augusta and Marina leave Salthill to pursue their quest for the self, and in both cases they opt for a confrontation with raw and rough nature. Augusta drives alone through the Midwestern and Western plains, and stays in small American towns, while Marina spends a winter in the Pocono Mountains in austere circumstances.

Male Perceptions of the Meaning of Life

In addition to Salthill’s anesthetizing atmosphere, and its exclusivity and isolation, a number of other factors contribute to the feeling of meaninglessness in the novel: namely, the Protestant work ethic, and fears of aging and eventual death. Oates is exploring a phase of life in which people assess their lives and careers, their achievements and failures. In drawing their conclusions, they can either make changes, or choose to leave everything as it is. This period is depicted as a kind of an initiation rite for the next phase of human life, retirement and old age. In the course of the narrative, Oates shows that as the characters age, previously supportive cultural and societal contexts lose their meaning and become irrelevant.

Most dramatically, a number of the male characters in the novel change their attitudes to traditional American cultural values, and particularly, attitudes to work. By exploring this and related issues, Oates dives straight into the core of American identity. A range of studies, articles, accounts and surveys have identified Americans as being the hardest-working people in the industrialized world.⁵⁵ Samuel Huntington writes, for example:

Overall, more Americans are in the labor force and work longer hours, have shorter vacations, get less in unemployment, disability, and retirement benefits, and retire later, than people in comparable societies. Overall, Americans also take greater pride in their work, tend to view leisure with ambivalence and at times guilt, disdain those who do not work, and see the work ethic as a key element of what it means to be an American. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that this objective and subjective emphasis on work is one distinguishing characteristic of American culture, compared to those of other societies.⁵⁶

When work loses its importance, life loses its meaning, because both culturally and traditionally, there is nothing else that men can do. The Salthillians are convinced that “*a loss of interest in money-making*”⁵⁷ is the beginning of the end. This perspective on life and work has its origins “not in the Catholic and Protestant churches but in the Protestant sects.”⁵⁸ If in Europe, the traditional aristocracy considered making money to be vulgar, in the New World, it was not only acceptable, but also actively encouraged by the clergy. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber shows that religion and business in America have always been closely intertwined. Weber quotes the Methodist founder, John Wesley, who after some hesitations about material values and Methodism being a “religion of the heart,” concluded that: “we ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.”⁵⁹ Weber also indicates that “as early as 1632,” there were “complaints of a peculiarly Calculating sort of Profit seeking in New England,”⁶⁰ which he links to early capitalist behavior “before the capitalist order” emerged in America. Furthermore, based on the ideas of one of the Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, Weber argues that for an American, nothing aside from work and acquisition has any value:

In fact, the *summum bonum* of his ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man

is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life.⁶¹

Seymour M. Lipset,⁶² meanwhile, links the emergence of the Protestant work ethic to the settlers' desire to be free. Since they were not rich, the only means of making a living in a country that lacked any kind of infrastructure was through sheer hard work and personal self-reliance. Lipset asserts that it is only logical that under such economic, social and natural circumstances, a spirit of "rational, competitive, individualistic behavior" was created, which in turn became necessary for entrepreneurial success.

In *Middle Age: A Romance*, Joyce Carol Oates sidesteps the issue of upward mobility and focuses on those Americans who have not had to compete in order to achieve entrepreneurial success, as it has already been realized by previous generations. For this group, "few ... had much interest in what had been known in an earlier, more primitive era as 'social climbing'; for where, after all, was there to climb *to*, when you lived in Salthill-on-Hudson?"⁶³ She is mainly concerned about the fact that on the verge of retirement, these entrepreneurs do not feel fulfilled. Despite having worked all their lives, they do not feel satisfaction and pride in their achievements.

For Tocqueville, in addition to "brooding" about making money, feelings of unhappiness stem from the fact that man has an unsatisfactorily short lifespan. He suggests that solace for this can be found in religious belief:

The short space of threescore years can never content the imagination of man; nor can the imperfect joys of this world satisfy his heart. Man alone, of all created beings, displays a natural contempt of existence, and yet a boundless desire to exist; he scorns life, but he dreads annihilation. These different feelings incessantly urge his soul to the contemplation of a future state, and religion directs his musings thither. Religion, then, is simply another form of hope, and it is no less natural to the human heart than hope itself.⁶⁴

For Oates, however, religion is not the answer. In this narrative, Oates associates the state of feeling like "embalmed corpses" with cultural limitations and lack of choice; the human condition (life may not, in fact, have meaning at all); a dearth of personal ambition and desire; and with the lack of a story that might connect a human being with his environs, culture, past and future. Each of the characters expresses a different vision of how life can lose its

meaning: Lionel's loss is defined by Protestant ethics; Owen suffers from existential boredom and loss of meaning; the "Salthill wives" lack desire and vision; and the blocked artist, Marina, has lost her will to create.

Unlike Tocqueville, Oates does not present religion as a source of hope and future fulfillment. She prefers to evoke a story, myth, or symbolic narrative. This explains why the novel is brimming with links to Europe's cultural heritage and to Greco-Roman mythology; it is as if the ancient world can provide the modern world with meaning, and subsequently with the will to live and create. In one of his discussions with Adam Berendt, Lionel Hoffmann has to struggle to remember the myth of Actaeon – a myth that he is destined to enact at a later point in the narrative. Abigail Des Pres, meanwhile, is confronted with her dependence and insecurity while viewing "The Madonna of the Rocks." Marina, in turn, has to subdue the creature Night, a reincarnation of the Michelangelo sculpture that adorns the Medici tomb in Florence.

Oates depicts Lionel Hoffmann as a man who is evaluating his long career as a CEO in the family business, provoking anger "that he'd bartered so much of his life in exchange for 'success.'"⁶⁵ Lionel's dissatisfaction and feelings of meaninglessness stem back to the isolated villages, or "gated communities," in which he has lived. Despite being separated by more than 30 years, the atmospheres in Salthill-on-Hudson and Broom Hills (Hoffmann's birthplace) appear identical in the novel. Time, "depressions and recessions don't touch those people," Oates has said in an interview with Koval;⁶⁶ they live outside society. In this passage, for example, Lionel Hoffmann recalls his youth:

The men commuted faithfully to New York City on early trains, and in fall and winter never returned before night; the women dealt with domestic servants, sent out handwritten invitations to parties and personally addressed and signed upward of five hundred Christmas cards each, each year. The Vietnam War waged on the far side of the moon. Why it matters so much, so suddenly, wasn't clear. If you didn't switch on the TV except for New York and local news, and again after eight p.m., and just rapidly skimmed certain newspapers, you could almost avoid it. Children who attended Broom Hills Country Day were protected from it. In Broom Hills, as not everywhere else, life remained serene and more or less controlled. Moral control, and aesthetic control. Up-zoning was the voter's most

passionate issue. Boundaries had to be drawn. Custom had to be maintained. For if Broom Hills was not the ideal, there could be no ideal; and the human spirit cries for the ideal, not faraway place and time but here and now.⁶⁷

Because the inhabitants of Broom Hills concentrate solely on life within Broom Hills, whatever they hear about the world outside – and they are particularly attentive to bad news – is threatening. Life outside their bedroom community is not associated with adventure and challenge, but with danger, drugs, wars, dirt, and death. In this environment, the foundations are laid for future loyalty to one's own class, and to the duty to protect “America as a serious moral nation”⁶⁸ from deterioration.

In order to preserve the purity of the pedigree, families carefully monitor marriages and future occupations. Lionel had “married primarily to please his parents; he’d married a sweet girl whom he hadn’t truly loved, but one of whom his parents had approved.”⁶⁹ As a child, he already knew he would work for Hoffmann Publishing, so he had neither the time nor the desire to explore his own inclinations. Thinking back on his work now, however, he moans: “oh, he was bored with publishing eight-hundred page illustrated books priced at two hundred dollars, on such subjects as endocrinology If once he’d been genuinely intrigued by medical science, as his father had been, he’d long since lost interest.”⁷⁰ Reflecting on his past, he realizes that “every action of his dating back to his boyhood had been in compliance with other’s wishes.”⁷¹ Thus despite being a top executive aged over 50, Lionel feels like a victim: he was neither allowed to choose his wife, nor his profession, nor explore life outside Broom Hills.

On the one hand, in her depiction of upper-class male attitudes to work and the tension between established work ethics and individual desires, Oates confirms Robert S. Weiss’s observation about American upper-class men, that “...work occupies an extremely central role in the life of upper middle class men. In contrast to blue-collar workers, these men rarely live for ‘after work’: work is the means by which they develop, express, and evaluate themselves.”⁷² On the other hand, Oates is concerned that work cannot be all that there is to live for. A similar concern is voiced in Cal Jillson’s study, in which he insists that an imbalance between work and leisure negatively affects our human desire for meaningful and fulfilled lives. He maintains:

Americans have never been very good at balancing work and leisure, factory and family, the outer plantation and inner.

American individualism and its focus on the importance of work as the pathway to security and status has energized a nation and created great wealth and power, but it has always had a darker side. ... Although prosperity is the proximate goal of work, an inner sense of peace and security, demands time off the treadmill, time with family and children, even time alone.⁷³

In Lionel's character, Oates affirms that this lack of balance between work and leisure, or rather a sole focus on money-making to the detriment of everything else, eventually results in a devastated state of being. This lack of authenticity, and the inability to create new meanings when the old ones disappear, are especially visible when approaching retirement. Lionel can hardly fall back on the short childhood episode when he discovered the dead hippies. It was the moment at which he became aware of his own autonomy, and had a sense of his own power as an individual. It was his first, if very confrontational, intercourse with the world outside the safety of the suburb. Now he realizes that "the folly of his life sprang from his remaining 'Hoffmann' when he was no Hoffmann. If he'd had the courage to change his name, and to choose another; to walk away from his family's money."⁷⁴ Simply discarding the name "Hoffmann" would not be enough to accomplish such a change, of course, but he does not raise the question that logically follows: that of who he was then.

Having left his wife, Lionel is unable to identify the roots of his problem, but instead dreams of the same kind of life with a younger woman. He would have kept his old wife if they had lived "in a sensible, pragmatic, polygamous society."⁷⁵ Talking with Roger Cavanagh at a bar, Lionel Hoffmann compares himself with his friend. He realizes that he has wronged not only his family, but also himself. Roger "was doing volunteer work for the National Project to Free the Innocent," while he was chasing a call-girl: "he was feeling envy. To care about something other than oneself, one's ridiculous sexual needs..."⁷⁶ At the end of the narrative, we learn that Lionel's mistress has left him, and he is a mentally and physically sick old man living in the gatehouse of his estate. Later, he is killed by his wife's dog. Oates thus draws a parallel between Lionel's death and the ultimate mythical act of revenge: the myth of Artemis (Diana) and Actaeon, in which Actaeon pays for seeing Artemis's dazzling female beauty by being turned into a stag and subsequently being torn to pieces by his own hounds. Lionel Hoffmann's last lesson is that female beauty is dangerous and has the power to destroy. Lionel's rejected wife, Camille, is also avenged; after all, it is her dog that kills Lionel.

Looking at Oates's oeuvre chronologically, we see that Lionel Hoffmann has a predecessor in the character of Edwin Locke in Oates's novel, *Cybele*.⁷⁷ Both men are executives who use destructive love affairs to try and escape the boredom of their suburban lives. This boredom is a mixture of satiety with everything they own and do, and anxiety about their own existence. In both cases, Oates makes it clear to the reader that their solution to the dilemma of meaninglessness is morally unacceptable, because they fail to liberate themselves from cultural constraints and self-deception. Their own deaths are the logical consequences of this behavior.

For both characters, Oates uses Greco-Roman mythology at the subterranean level of the text, while alluding to it at the "visible" level. The use of myth helps to reveal subconscious, instinctual layers of the human psyche. Both Edwin Locke and Lionel Hoffmann indulge in love affairs as a means of acting out instinctual yearnings that have been suppressed by their suburban, middle-class lifestyles. In the ancient world, these deep forces would have been given recognition and expression in the celebration of cults such as Cybele's. In the modern suburban world, however, such freedom is restricted by sets of rules. Oates clearly recognizes the necessity of rules and the need to constrain destructive manifestations of the "dark side," but she is also in favor of freedom of expression in a constructive sense. No one is completely free of any responsibility. In Oates's view, Edwin Locke and Lionel Hoffmann opt for a destructive path, lose their way, and have to die.

In the context of these narratives, the use of mythology evokes the helplessness of delusional men: Cybele condemns her lover, Attis, to madness for his adultery, while Diana turns Actaeon into a stag that is fated to be torn to pieces by hounds. Edwin Locke is blinded by his obsession (a form of madness) with becoming unconditionally free, as if this obsession had been cast on him by heavenly powers. In this case, the goddess is not one particular woman but the whole concept of obsession, with accompanying mania and delusion; indeed, the ancient cult of Cybele and Attis was associated with orgies, castrations, and self-inflicted wounds. In the last scene, the characters in the novel who are connected with Edwin act as if they are participants in a celebratory orgy dedicated to the goddess, Cybele, the climax of which is the beating to death and burning of Edwin's body "with a certain ceremonial grace."⁷⁸

Both Lionel and Edwin make futile attempts to escape themselves and the "theology of quiet desperation,"⁷⁹ transgressions for which they are punished. Each makes the mistake of failing to seek new meaning in their lives; instead, both try to flee, and eventually fall into traps of their own making. Svendsen

confirms that the idea of abandoning tradition in the absence of having anything to replace it with is unworkable, and merely creates further frustration and boredom:

In modernity the subject is released from tradition and has to seek new meanings for itself. The modern subject does so via transgressions of various kinds, but is left more bereft after each new transgression. ... Boredom and lack of meaning finally almost coincide, with the modern subject believing that this meaning can be acquired by transgressing the self, by making all the accessible meaning one's own.⁸⁰

While Lionel Hoffmann is both the villain and the victim of “deprivation, stoicism and duty,” the other two male characters in the novel, Owen Cutler and Roger Cavanagh, manage to liberate themselves from constricting upper-middle-class ideology and find new sources of meaning. Moved by the death of their friend, Adam Berendt, Owen Cutler and Roger Cavanagh suddenly realize that their lives have long been lacking meaning. Roger, a divorced corporate lawyer and a failed father to a teenage daughter, reflects while in his office: *“Is this all there is, finally? A mad rushing forward. Seconds, hours. Days. Years. Through a lighted tunnel for a while, and then – oblivion.”*⁸¹ Owen’s wife, Augusta Cutler, declares that she and her husband are “corpses embalmed together,”⁸² and leaves Salthill. As the result, both men challenge accepted norms: Owen Cutler gives up his work, and takes up gardening and philosophy whilst waiting for his wife to return; and Roger, having conducted a vigorous love affair with a paralegal, Naomi Volpe, successfully fights for custody of his newborn son.

Owen’s character rests on a discrepancy between his outer self, “a man of integrity,”⁸³ and his inner self, which is filled with feelings of transitoriness and nothingness. As a “man of integrity,” Owen is convinced that he is a “stoic,”⁸⁴ indifferent to emotions and to death. Inside, however, he is haunted by the image of a “void.”⁸⁵ When Owen has to identify a female body (presumably that of his wife, Augusta), all of his suppressed insecurities, tenderness and weaknesses rise to the surface. He stammers, doubts, vomits and faints, in a manner very unlike that of a “prominent” citizen. The Stoics’ argument that “our experiences do not exist” fails to help Owen here, and emotion overwhelms him. Connecting with his “feminine” side – his emotions and vulnerabilities – helps to awaken him from years of anesthetized Salthill life, and enables him to maintain and secure his choice. Owen em-

braces his ennui and reflects on his life while engaging in simple activities such as gardening, growing orchids, and waiting for his wife to come home.

The transformation of Owen is the undoing of a man “of integrity;” a self-centered, narcissistic “prominent man,” whose image is totally dependent on his success in business and the size of his bank account. This transformation is possible because, unlike Lionel Hoffmann, Owen Cutler accepts the challenge of looking for another identity, and allows the change to occur. Although the old Owen is concerned about his appearance and the impression he makes on other people, his inner persona is insecure, which is often a virtue in Oates’s characters. Owen’s insecurity prevents his outer self from becoming irredeemably inflated, and inwardly, he continues to doubt and wonder:

In Salthill he was a prominent citizen, everywhere he went his hand was warmly shaken. It astonished him, that no one had yet guessed that Owen Cutler was a froth of bubbles floating upon a void. It filled him with wonder, both guilt and gratitude, that others should shake his hand, that women should teeter on their toes of their expensive shoes, to graze their lips against his cheek, as if he were as real as they.⁸⁶

In her characterization of Owen, Oates repeatedly returns to the motif of a void, revealing his pessimistic view of life. Owen feels that life has very little meaning, like a “froth of bubbles floating upon a void.”⁸⁷ In particular, when Owen’s protective shield – the image of a “man of integrity,” a “prominent” citizen – is destroyed, his friends treat him as if he were “a dead man.”⁸⁸ For Oates, this character’s strength lies in the courage with which he exposes his insecurity. For this reason, Owen cares little about his rejection by his Salthill friends when it occurs. Not quite convinced that his wife is dead, Owen continues to search for her, in part refusing to give up hope and in part deceiving himself, as if the boundary between life and death had become blurred. In doing so, Oates uses references to “tropical orchids” and “three gardens”⁸⁹ to symbolize a life of thrift and the Garden of Eden itself, but Owen “is no longer absolutely certain what *is* and what *is not*.”⁹⁰ Oates leaves Owen happy with his lot, once more with his wife and working in his garden. Does he experience fulfillment in the end? Oates suggests that replacing corporate work with gardening was a means of creating meaning in Owen’s life, as it allowed him to establish a very direct relationship with nature. On the other hand, Owen is aware that the void continues to exist. In

short, a mildly cynical Owen Cutler makes peace with himself, by accepting the aging process and embracing the ennui of everyday life.

Ian McCullough, the protagonist of *American Appetites*⁹¹ – a novel that Oates wrote more than a decade before *Middle Age* – chooses a very different course. Although he also feels that life lacks meaning, he has a very different vision. Both men are insecure about their very existence: while Owen feels that he is living above a “void,” Ian balances between life and death, and thoughts of death frequently overwhelm him. Having lost his wife in a domestic quarrel, been accused of her murder and then acquitted, and then having married a much younger woman, Ian plans to embark upon a new life, but his yearning for a fresh beginning is outweighed by the sense that he has already “seen it all.” Neither his new life, nor his new partner, nor a contract to write a book for Harvard University on his favorite subject, inspires him to live. He feels the “despair” that his father felt before committing suicide. He contemplates suicide himself, and imagines shooting himself “when the season turns.”⁹²

Like Owen, Ian is intelligent and civilized, and takes up a number of new activities during his retirement. These pastimes fail to motivate him to continue to exist, however. Oates’s purpose in writing *American Appetites* is similar to the message of *Middle Age: A Romance*: exposing the hidden layers of American upper-class life. While on the surface, everything appears “seamless” and perfect, frustrations, adultery, boredom, despair and misery lie underneath. Admitting feelings of loneliness and isolation is impossible in a place where the American Dream has come true, despite “the empty heart of darkness at the core of the American Dream – the depletion of idealism, the pointlessness of personal ambition and aspiration.”⁹³ Owen Cutler’s attempts to discuss these taboo subjects with others are rejected: the women to whom he is talking will not even accept a glass of champagne from him. In *American Appetites*, Oates sees more potential for openness: Denis Grinnell discusses hypocrisy with his friend, Ian McCullough; women “simulate happiness, answering the telephone, opening the door to guests, where a moment before, there was something very different … from happiness.”⁹⁴ Oates also describes how characters experience loneliness while in public with so-called friends:

All these parties we go to and give – or used to, before last spring. And in a family, at the very hub of a family, a household… it can be so much intensely worse. Because you know

you should not be lonely there. ... And, too, there is a sort of taboo about talking about it ...⁹⁵

In both novels, Oates touches upon what happens when characters lack ideals and the inspiration to move on. Indeed, Owen is only able to move on when he surrenders all personal ambition, a release of “all pride and consequently all shame”⁹⁶ that is not achieved by Ian McCullough in Oates’s earlier novel. If in *American Appetites*, Oates depicts characters that are aware of the misery of their lives and continue to live as before, in *Middle Age: A Romance*, Oates portrays the moment of realization and subsequent attempts to change. In this aspect, *American Appetites* is a tragedy, while in *Middle Age: A Romance*, Oates creates distance between the characters’ distress and their psyches to tragicomic effect.

Female Perceptions of the Meaning of Life

In a sense, American upper-class men are cheated by the American Dream in Oates’s novel: their way of life deprives them of individual aspirations and the leisurely pursuit of pleasure. Women, however, are even more disadvantaged, in that they hardly have a voice at all. In fact, it is only recently that American women have come to enjoy the same privileges and rights as men. Surveying different periods in American history, Jim Cullen concludes:

The American Dream is in many ways a story of omissions, and few omissions have been more glaring than that of the place of women in society ... Inequalities of opportunity and condition have been central features of the American experience for women, and while this has changed to some degree in modern times, the American Dream remains problematic. It has largely been a male dream...⁹⁷

Cal Jillson points out that women’s earnings constitute just 75% of those of men in the United States, despite the fact that they now comprise 47% of the workforce. Moreover, women face a multitude of pressures in the workplace, and often have to choose between having a career and marriage. America also lags behind in the provision of social and economic support for women who have children and who wish to continue to work.⁹⁸

Although the women of *Middle Age: A Romance* prefer not to work and face little in the way of financial disadvantage, they are excluded from the

American Dream in other respects. Traditionally, the upper classes have had different rules for women, preferring to see them as subordinate to their fathers, husbands and other women. Nelson W. Aldrich writes:

Until coeducation came to St. Midas and Harvard, both sexes of the Old Rich tended to regard women as either wanton or indulgent: wanton with men and with treasure, indulgent with their children. Women were as potentially corrupting, debilitating, and degenerative as wealth itself. But just as wealth was also uplifting, nourishing, but firmly suppressed, so were mothers and other female lovers. The suppression was most violent among Old Rich women.⁹⁹

In her study of upper-class American women in the early 1980s, Suzanne Ostrander states that these “women lack freedom, independence, and influence over family decisions relative to men.”¹⁰⁰ Although they experience their roles as housewives as extremely limiting, they do not wish to challenge their lot. Women’s colleges, such as Vassar and Wellesley, prepare these women for their future roles, and they know how to behave and what to expect. Ostrander suggests that first, these women believe that “men are major economic providers and decision makers;”¹⁰¹ second, their work in the home is of a supervisory nature (since they have servants), and work in the marketplace would only limit their flexibility; and lastly, men are very powerful, in that they “dominate the economic and political affairs of the entire country,”¹⁰² meaning that it would be virtually impossible to challenge their authority at home. The women are very aware of the advantages of their class, and to challenge these would risk removing something that had given meaning to their lives.¹⁰³

In *Middle Age: A Romance*, Oates’s vision of upper-class women is similar to that of Ostrander’s study. Her heroines feel themselves to be dependent on their husbands, despite having their own money, and these women are also confined to fulfill the four roles prescribed by the customs of their class (wife, mother, club member and volunteer). Moreover, by fulfilling these roles, they believe that they are maintaining the class itself. According to Ostrander, as wives, such women are supposed to make social arrangements and occasionally travel with their husbands on business. As mothers, they have to make sure that their children attend the right private schools, and receive the right invitations that will allow them to meet and marry someone from their class. By carrying out volunteer work, they exert their control over

and obstruct governmental interference in community organizations, thereby (they believe) helping to preserve liberty.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, they also “share their energy and wealth” with the less fortunate, allowing them to justify their privileged position and birthright. Clubs serve as places for screening, building and maintaining social contacts, serving the “solidarity and cohesion of the class.”¹⁰⁵

While all of these rules and conventions can add comfort, ease and structure to the life of an upper-class woman, the lack of space that it leaves for exploring individual desires can lead to boredom and a sense of having been anesthetized. The portrayal of women in *Middle Age: A Romance* mostly focuses on the latter phenomenon, and on the passivity, inactivity, weightlessness and subordination of upper-class females. Oates clearly feels that this is a tragic way in which to live, and often chooses grotesque and exaggerated images in order to express this sense of tragedy. Thus the Salthill wives resemble a flock of sheep pressing against one other, afraid of the world around them; while at the same time, their tragedy is that there is no solid ground beneath their feet:

There was an uncanny innocence and simplicity to their beauty, as if it had never been tested; as if none of these women groaned in orgasm, sweated, defecated. As if beneath their expensive clothes their bodies were sleek in perfection as expensive dolls. They floated in that state of party-euphoria when they needed to touch one another, their praise of one another’s hair skin, clothing, beauty was extravagant. ... They were sisters, hatched from the same great egg. It was as if ... women sought in one another, as in magical reflecting surfaces, some measure of their immortality. They were bright shimmering petals floating upon lightless, depthless chaos beneath Salthill which reached to the very molten centre of Earth.¹⁰⁶

The most obvious characteristic of these women is their submission and lack of voice, in contrast with the modern, stereotypical American female. Camille Hoffmann is “inaudible on the phone”¹⁰⁷ and invisible, “a blur” in family snapshots; she perceives herself to be a “wraith,” and eventually admits that she “had no vision of herself, for her vision had been taken away from her, and she had no confidence.”¹⁰⁸ This is in strong contrast with Tocqueville’s description of the American woman as “full of reliance on her own strength,” boldly managing her “thoughts and [her] language amid all

the difficulties of free conversation.” Her “confidence seems to be shared by all around her” and “she is taught to survey it [the world] with a firm and calm gaze.”¹⁰⁹

Most Salthill wives lack the power to protest against their four prescribed roles, or even to imagine that any other roles might be possible. Moreover, at this stage of their lives, even the four roles (wife, mother, club member and volunteer) offer little solace: their children have grown up or live with their spouses, their husbands are about to retire, their social contacts have been secured and their social circles completed, and when undertaking fundraising activities, they repeatedly encounter the same old acquaintances. If the men in the novel mostly suffer from the meaninglessness that results from their hollow lives as executives, the women suffer a similar meaninglessness with respect to the four prescribed roles. Not one woman constructs an alternative life as an individual or as a professional, despite the fact that every woman in *Middle Age: A Romance* has a college degree. They are middle-aged, exhausted, and emotionally and intellectually devastated, and they have certainly resigned themselves to a life of both existential and situational boredom.

Since the role of women is crucially important for the stability and coherence of the entire social class, it is not permissible to display or discuss strains, contradictions, tensions and dissatisfactions. This results in a hypocritical everyday existence: in public, for their circle of friends and acquaintances, even for their family members, these women project an image of perfection, happiness and eternal youth. In private, and internally, these women’s emotional and intellectual lives are filled with misery and depression. To a certain degree, Ian McCullough speaks the truth when he says that “it isn’t hypocrisy; it’s simply a sense of decorum. Our obligation to one another: to be pleasant, agreeable, civil.”¹¹⁰ Of course, the use of social masks can have important functions, but these should not overshadow authenticity and honesty, at least for ourselves. The existence of exaggerated civility, pleasantness and emptiness behind such a mask or image is repellent, and Oates mockingly hints at this lack of sincerity:

... rich women ravaged by loneliness as by sexual desire, afflicted with compulsion to talk as physical as a tic, with mysteriously remote husbands and grown children who’d proven disappointing. What good-hearted women these were, how generous, how kind and solicitous; and how one fled them, with stammered apologies and averted eyes.¹¹¹

It is mostly the women in the novel, and to some extent the men, who create a vicious circle by expressing their emotions purely out of fear of exclusion from a particular social group. On the one hand, to belong to this “Salthill circle,” which is probably more selective than any club, requires one to be in possession of perfect social skills, looks and behavior, since – as one of the women believes – “the first principle of human sanity is to maintain the challenging external life that’s called social.”¹¹² If there are any deviations from this perfect standard, they have to be hidden away from the outside world. Thus “sanity” is maintained, and one is admitted to the “circle.”

Nobility, dignity, and respectability – romanticized and idealized values that lose their meaning when driven to such extremes – are supposed to constitute the norms of this exclusive group. Despite this, Oates shows how the ideal of extreme perfection is alien to human nature, devastating for the characters themselves, and very boring for others. Thus these women secretly invent escape routes in order to save their lives. Here, Oates can’t help but again add a good dose of irony and sarcasm to her description of the lifestyle pursued by the “Salthill matrons”:

In the absence of their devoted husbands, which might one day be tabulated as an absence of years, Salthill wives were inevitably ‘drawn’ to men not their husbands. Rarely were these catastrophic love affairs that resulted in divorce and remarriage, but rather romances of an indefinite nature: there were discernable patterns in which a woman might imagine herself in love with the husband of a friend, and when infatuation dissolved she might imagine herself in love with the husband of another friend, and, in time, with another; and yet another; over a period of years in a social circle as constricted as the one to which the Hoffmanns belonged, a woman would eventually come round to imagining herself in love with a man, or men, with whom she’d imagined herself in love at an earlier time. So long a woman did not become involved with a man outside her social circle, such behavior was perceived by husbands to be harmless.¹¹³

Next to imaginary love affairs and infatuations, various “acceptable” diseases and ailments provide an additional safety valve. Feeling and knowing that something is missing, the women disguise the real problem by falling prey to a popular ailment. This allows them to preserve their status, and

internal pressures are released by being able to at least discuss some of the symptoms. Projecting a taboo problem onto another, more “civil” one, helps the women to cope with the intense boredom and desolation of their lives, just as imaginary consumption provides Hans Castorp with a reason to do nothing and to stay in Berghof. Oates continues in the same half-ironic, half-sarcastic tone:

In Salthill it was primarily women, of course, who were afflicted in myriad mysterious ways. Nerves, ‘migraines,’ loss of appetite, depression. There was a free ranging malaise commonly known as ‘flu,’ and there was a near-ubiquitous condition called as ‘chronic fatigue’ – ‘Epstein-Barr syndrome’ – which particularly afflicted women without work or responsibilities, like Abigail Des Pres. Where in another era such women might have passed around recipes to one another, dress patterns and outgrown baby clothes, in present day Salthill-on-Hudson they passed around their symptoms, which constituted a strong bond among them.¹¹⁴

A fear of challenging “Custom,” the imperative of denying the imperfection of the past and the desire to live in a dream world: these are also themes that Oates explores in the short story, “A Princeton Idyll,”¹¹⁵ published in 2006. The story consists of an epistolary exchange between Muriel Kubelik, an ex-servant who is now in her seventies, and Sophie Niemark, an author of children’s books and the granddaughter of a famous logician, now in her early forties. In a letter to Muriel, Sophie begs to know everything about her grandfather’s last days and death. When Muriel reveals that he was an alcoholic and interested in pornographic magazines, Sophie calls her a “slanderer, a liar, mentally ill and depraved old woman,”¹¹⁶ and tells her never to write her again. The ironic title, “A Princeton Idyll,” evokes our strong drive to idealize the past, our pride, and our desire to identify ourselves with romanticized figures. In calling the old woman a liar, Sophie rejects the reality of then as well as the reality of now. She is dissatisfied with her career as an author and her failure to become rich, and thus uses her grandfather’s fame to enhance her image and give power to her identity. When Ms Kubelik threatens to shatter this imaginary world by revealing her grandfather’s all-too-human characteristics, Sophie becomes scared. She cannot afford to lose her grandfather’s “aura” and accept herself for who she really is: Sophie, a children’s author.

This short story relates very directly to the tension experienced by the Salthill women: the tension between the image they believe they have to maintain, and who they really are. They cannot feel alive, however, unless they open themselves up to reality. It is interesting to note that in this short story, published five years after *Middle Age: A Romance*, Oates depicts her heroine as a woman immersed in her fears and preoccupied with her external image. Although Sophie desires to find out what really happened, and dares to lift up the corner of the curtain, she lets it fall again very quickly. She turns down an opportunity to find out the truth about her identity: for her, an incomplete existence is preferable to acknowledging the damaged image of her grandfather. It is better to live in a dream.

Unlike Sophie, when Augusta Cutler learns the unpleasant truth about who Adam Berendt really was, she accepts it. Although she decides to keep the truth to herself, this is not because she wishes to protect Adam's image; rather, Oates suggests that Augusta feels that the other inhabitants of Salthill are unworthy of the truth. If they are to become worthy, they must search for it themselves. In the end, like with writing, Oates believes that it is not the result but the process itself that matters – “the satisfaction is in the effort.”¹¹⁷ It does not matter who Adam really was as a child, but how he developed from being a teenage alcoholic into a charismatic sculptor. Moreover, in Augusta's case, the quest that changes her life is in turn more important than the truth about Adam's real identity.

Sophie's understanding of the meaning of life is close to that of Abigail Des Pres. Abigail links meaning and identity to the achievement of beauty and immaculate style. For Abigail and for the other women of Salthill, it is imperative to appear beautiful, youthful and well-dressed. Abigail Des Pres thinks: “*If I'm not beautiful – what am I?*”¹¹⁸; being beautiful is her way of feeling “real.” In the process of “waking” she starts to question this feeling, and “She sees her face, a pale floating petal, in a mirror across the room. Why are beautiful women so shallow, like cutouts?”¹¹⁹ In her portrayal, Oates ridicules the delusion that youth and beauty can redeem the meaning of one's life. During the poetry reading by Donegal Croom, Oates situates 300 Salthill women among cut flowers, suggesting that making beauty the central meaning of one's life results in fragility and transient charm. Abigail Des Pres views her “sisters” through the “poet's bloodshot eyes”:

Strange that all of them are beautiful. The plain have been transformed into beauties by the magic of affluence. And there are no longer ‘ugly’ women at all. Meringue hair, glaring cos-

metic faces, piranha smiles, jewels that wink like semaphore signals. That commingled drunken smell of myriad perfumes.¹²⁰

Oates's use of epithets ("meringue," "piranha"), and her comparison between jewels and semaphore signals, bring a certain degree of reality and irony to the narrative, and prevent it from becoming sentimental. Those who pursue beauty without regard to content risk losing their authenticity. "You're very beautiful but you all look alike,"¹²¹ comments the unshaven and underdressed poet. Through his poetry, he tries to reach the women behind the "glaring cosmetic" masks, to make them "feel something ... even against their will,"¹²² yet the rude and "savagely funny" poem fails to arouse any emotion. The women are like the waiters who serve them: "expressionless and mechanical as robots."¹²³ They are there to satisfy their circle's expectations, and to satisfy the poet as an audience. They were raised to be this way: to negate their emotions, opinions and personalities. Abigail is the best example of this type:

Abigail was a woman who eroticized her friendships with men, even the husbands of her women friends, out of desire to please, not out of actual desire; Roger believed that, like many beautiful women of her class, Abigail had been raised to feel no physical desire for anything, not sex, not food or drink. Like one of those exquisitely over-bred greyhounds so taut with nerves you can see them trembling.¹²⁴

The beauty of women lacking individuation soon becomes boring and even comical; women among thousands of flowers cease to be human beings, and become "chattering birds."¹²⁵ If one's goal in life is to be beautiful and live abundantly, then this can easily be achieved in Salthill. Having done so, however, no challenge remains, and life offers little meaning. According to the Dutch philosopher, Rutger Claassen,¹²⁶ those living a life of abundance must give, regardless of how: whether they create works of art, or make scientific discoveries, or introduce useful new products to the world. Otherwise, they risk losing their sense of purpose, and feeling uncomfortable. Female beauty is merely a characteristic that cannot be shared with the others. It is an egoistic and narcissistic trait, an outward shell. Oates suggests that these women's breeding, and their social circles, have erased their inwards lives and desires, whether these were expressed in the beginning of a

life of teaching, or as a ballet dancer. Their lives have been stripped of personal meaning. That is why women, as well as men, think and speak about being dead and about having to save their lives.

However, the Salthill wives are able to change. They do not attempt radical changes, such as stepping outside their class or their roles within in, but they do create new meanings within these defined roles. As in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, in *Middle Age: A Romance*, boredom must reach a high level of saturation, and an external event must occur before the spell can be broken. In *The Magic Mountain*, war liberates Hans Castorp from his "enchantment." In the vision of 1990s America depicted in the *Middle Age: A Romance*, it is the death of Adam Berendt, the philosopher-teacher, which awakens the characters and helps them to create a new future.

Camille Hoffman's awakening is inspired by her desire to connect with the community, and she becomes a volunteer for an animal asylum. The difference between this latter type of volunteer work and her previous volunteer work for the "circle" is that she takes care of the animals herself, rather than simply chairing a committee. Moreover, for Camille, dogs – with their emotions and needs – are more real than the people with whom she interacts at fundraising events, or her husband (who destroys himself). Through Camille, Oates asserts that one way of creating meaning in one's life is to become more broadly involved in the community, rather than limiting oneself to a narrowly-defined role.

Having lost her son to her ex-husband, the neurotic Abigail Des Pres obtains a daughter of Chinese origin through her second-husband-to-be, Gerhardt Ault. At first sight, one might assume that Abigail is not only expanding her role as a mother, but is also opening up her life to other ethnic groups. However, it becomes clear that Abigail merely uses this adopted girl to satisfy her inbred wish to please and as such, Abigail has not changed. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Oates leaves us with a glimmer of hope for the future: for the first time in her life, Abigail feels alive while tackling some brutal youths on the streets of New York. It is also the first time that she truly feels emotions and connects with others.

Artistic Boredom

In the character of Marina Troy, an artist and bookstore owner, boredom is given a somewhat different embodiment than in that of the other female characters. Marina deals with her boredom in a different way, by seeking solitude in a remote log cabin that Adam Berendt had left to her. Her charac-

ter offers an example of how boredom can be a form of artistic necessity, as Nietzsche saw it:

They do not fear boredom as much as work without pleasure; they actually require a lot of boredom if their work is to succeed. For thinkers and all sensitive spirits, boredom is that disagreeable “windless calm” of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effects on them. Precisely this is what lesser natures cannot achieve by any means.¹²⁷

Marina Troy is introduced to the reader as a sculptor who has lost confidence in herself. For her, Salthill is like a sanatorium: she has come to the town to hide from herself, and gain a respite from the rest of the world. Like most of the inhabitants, Marina has opted for stagnation, rather than “craziness” – that is, art and creativity. Having lost her “courage of ignorance,”¹²⁸ she has not built up a healthy balance between perfection and imperfection, which she could rely on in stressful times. Hence when her art became “too important”¹²⁹ to her, she suffered a breakdown.

In Salthill, life for an artist is similar to that of life in the ivory tower of Sainte-Beuve, where there is no contact with real emotions and an abundance of superficial perfection. Marina uses this artistic devitalization to protect herself temporarily from self-destruction, and to pull herself together. In the longer run, however, it destroys all of her creative aspirations. In one of the dialogues based on the Socratic method, Marina tells her story to Adam Berendt, and insists that she is happy as a small bookstore owner. It takes Adam’s death to spur her to travel alone to the Pocono Mountains. In doing so, Oates creates a paradoxical situation: spending the winter in solitude, Marina experiences more of life than when she had lived among many people in Salthill. An encounter with a Gulf war veteran leads to sexual awakening, and she is conned by an “abused girl,” Lorene. Most of all, Marina has to learn that she is not destined to finish the sculptures that were left by Adam Berendt, nor subdue her own creativity by imagining what other people, or the market, want. She has to recover her own self as a creator.

In the imaginary creature called “Night,” Oates creates a powerful symbol of boredom, whose daytime incarnation is that of a “dark-furred” lynx. At night, Marina feels this creature lying on her chest, almost choking her. On the one hand, Night stands for the “dark,” subconscious side of human nature that plays a vital role in the artistic process: the side that was revealed by

Adam Berendt, and that is secretly present in all Salthill's residents. On the other hand, Oates alludes to Michelangelo's sculpture 'Night,' which sits alongside Dawn, Twilight and Day in Florence's Medici Chapel. Brooding and gloomy Night represents winter in all its tedium, sluggishness and melancholy. Both the sculpture and the imaginary creature represent the power of the inertia that is draining Marina's creative, emotional and sexual energy. Having endured this nightmare, Marina's resurrection as an artist can begin:

It was at the end of December, at the turn of the year, that the warm furred creature came in stealth to settle upon her chest. That smothering weight. Heavy, and heavier. *Can't breathe. Help me.* In the night the dark-furred thing with a snout that smelled of blood, pushing wetly against Maria's mouth. Nudging, kissing. The heavy warm dark-furred smothering thing with teeth, claws. *Thwaite, Thwaite!* came the muffled guttural cry. In desperation Marina recoiled in her sleep, threw the thing off herself, woke nauseated and repelled. 'What is happening to me! I can't bear this.' She was going mad. *Thwaite* was madness, and *Night* was madness. She climbed out of her messy bed as you might climb out of a shallow messy grave.¹³⁰

At this moment, Marina reconnects with herself, and starts to work on her own sculptures. As a result, the predatory lynx that had haunted her – that symbol of stagnation and boredom – is transformed into a harmless, smile-inducing creature, quite unlike Michelangelo's Night. This creature is made of artifacts that have been collected from many different walks of life, including dolls, newspapers, bird bones, and so forth. In this way, Oates suggests that while desolation may result in unimportant, discarded pieces, once assembled, these can acquire a totally new meaning. When overcome, a lynx – predatory and carnivorous, aggressive and suffocating – may emerge as an unthreatening, cuddly creature. In the process of this transformation, while making the sculpture of Night, Marina commits symbolic acts of aggression: "like a predator Marina tore apart dolls purchased at yard sales and used hair, glass eyes, face fragments, tiny fingers,"¹³¹ demolishing them and at the same time, eradicating her fears and stupor. Just like Abigail Des Pres, Marina Troy needs violence – or at least the sight of it, in the form of bloody and part-devoured carcasses of rabbits and squirrels – in order to reconnect with life.

At the end of the novel, we see that Marina has undergone a transformation in both appearance and character. She has changed from being a “never-married, virginal appearing, fiercely independent”¹³² and a copy of “the young, white skinned Elisabeth I,”¹³³ into a woman who “felt faint with longing”¹³⁴ for family life, and for becoming a mother and a lover. Indeed, it is through the portrayal of Marina, an artist and the character who is closest to Oates herself, that Oates raises a question about whether it is possible for pure emotions, such as those felt in a classical tragedy, to exist among the upper-middle classes:

Why do affluence, beauty, ‘order’ seem to us more superficial than poverty, ugliness, disorder; why does the human spirit seem dulled by the one, and enhanced by the other? Surely this is illogical? A delusion?¹³⁵

Marina cannot answer this question; she can only attest, through her own experience, that “the human spirit is dulled” by “beauty and order.” Life in Salthill sapped her creativity; in order to find herself as an artist, she had to live in solitude in the mountains, surrounded by nature, in the absence of forced civility, social obligations, intrigue and hypocrisy. This suggests that we perhaps pay too high a price for the shallow social relationships that characterize life in the suburbs; such a life leaves no space for artistic concentration and for real emotions.

This question appears to be one that Oates constantly asks herself, either in her oeuvre or in interviews that she has given. In one of her most recent interviews, Oates tells Greg Johnson:

Why the true travails of the rich seem the stuff of comedy and not tragedy, to one with a proletarian heart like my own, I don’t know. I am so much more emotionally engaged with Maureen Wendall [a character in the 1969 novel *them*] yearning to live in one of the large beautiful houses in a certain Detroit neighborhood than I am with individuals who live in these houses, though, at one time, I myself lived in one of these houses, in fact.¹³⁶

In this passage, Oates’s use of the word “yearning,” might well provide the key to her answer. Failure and imperfection in Oates’s work are usually related to honesty, and to having the freedom to develop oneself. Maureen

Wendall, for instance, is following a particular goal in life: to live in a beautiful house and to join the middle classes. Success and perfection signify an end for her, however: there is nowhere to go, nothing to improve, no desire or yearning. The stagnation that is rooted in perfection often leads to meaninglessness, boredom and ennui. In her essay, “Notes on Failure,” Oates argues that failure – or a certain degree of failure – “may be a truth,” while “success is a temporary illusion of some intoxicating sort.”¹³⁷ Both failure and one’s awareness of mortality stimulate the author to ensure that “the next book” is even better, and challenges one to act. When living in a successful, supremely comfortable suburb, where one’s every wish is fulfilled and where indications of mortality and old age have all but been eradicated, one lacks the motivation to develop and to create new meanings. The flawlessness of such an environment and of the human body will eventually lead to the failure of the human spirit and of life.

Although as an author, it seems to be counterintuitive to Oates to envision a classical tragedy in the world of the wealthy, she still imagines that the life of the upper classes can be tragic. As we have seen, Oates integrates the structure of a Greek tragedy into the book, alluding to the characters’ tragic lives despite their comic depiction. One should note, however, that while the protagonists of classical tragedies were often wealthy (kings or their families), Greek heroes were far from being “emotionally dead;” rather, they were capable of acts that were larger than life itself. For the characters of *Middle Age* such acts of heroism feel distant and unnecessarily cruel: “a man makes a mistake, he owns up to it: puts out his eyes, or hangs himself. There was no self-pity and pleading for justice and mercy.”¹³⁸ However, by nullifying all danger and sanitizing life, the potential for heroism is removed with the danger, and the upper- and middle classes are left with “diminished personalities.”

Ellen G. Friedman has also noticed the contrasts between Greek tragedy and Oates’s portrayals of middle-class America. She writes:

Oates’s novels do not provide the relief we associate with the final act of tragedies, in which the old corrupt world falls so that a new world and better world may replace it. In her novels there is no world to be redeemed and no new heaven and new earth to be gained, as her portrait of suburbia demonstrates. There is only this world. And it is toward this single, painful perception, the implications of which she repeatedly mines, that Oates’s art so gracefully moves.¹³⁹

Despite having been published over 20 years ago, Friedman's comment is also true of Oates's recent novels. With the passing of time, Oates has not amended her vision of upper-class America, and neither has she stopped writing about it. With each novel and short story about this class, Oates brings to light different aspects of life in rich suburbia. Maybe one day, Oates will be able to give an answer to the question, why affluence seems to us more superficial than poverty. Maybe then, she will add the final missing pieces to the puzzle. For now, though, with *Middle Age: A Romance*, Oates – like Joseph Brodsky – is suggesting that the problem of boredom may have no solution other than acceptance: embrace the boredom, and remain passionate. For “passion, above all is a remedy against boredom,” as well as pain. “[w]hat’s good about boredom, about anguish and the sense of the meaninglessness … is that it is not a deception.”¹⁴⁰

Chapter 4

Image, Artistic Freedom, Rootless Existence and Myth

At the end of the 20th century, Joyce Carol Oates developed an interest in the media and celebrity culture. In her novel, *Broke Heart Blues* (1999), affluent teenagers create a mythical cult around an alleged killer; *Blonde* (2000) examines the life of an American icon, Marilyn Monroe; and Oates's most recent novel, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008), is a critique of the pursuit of fame and tabloid culture. It is important to note that in *Blonde* and *My Sister, My Love*, Oates draws on real-life stories, which she relates to a more general discussion of the issues surrounding celebrity culture. Indeed, in one interview, Oates said of her intention to write about Marilyn Monroe:

I wanted to write about the life of an ordinary American in the 1940s who is made into this commodity called Marilyn Monroe... She was a real, quivering person who became a great vulgar, commercialized poster, but she died without much money and a career of only ten years. But that is the reality of so many American heroes. Just think of Elvis Presley.¹

Gavin Cologne-Brookes regards Oates's portrayal of Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde* as symbolic of the 20th-century “blond icon phenomenon ... from Eva Peron to Grace Kelly.”² He argues that Princess Diana’s tragic death might have inspired Oates to write *Blonde*, especially in view of the fact that Oates had written an essay³ in which “she appraises the British establishment’s role in the life and death of Diana.”⁴ *My Sister, My Love*, meanwhile, was inspired by the still-unsolved murder of the six-year-old beauty pageant star, JonBenét Ramsey,⁵ who had been made into a child celebrity by America’s media.

In this chapter, I look at how these three complementary narratives explore different aspects of the same cultural phenomenon. *Blonde* exposes the ugly side of stardom and celebrity; *Broke Heart Blues* depicts the demanding audiences and fans that create idols out of celebrities; and *My Sister, My Love* looks at how parents can act in unrestrained ways to push their children to

fame. I suggest that these three narratives reveal Oates's fear that basic values, including honest work, stability, rationality and common sense, are being lost. My assertion is that the world of celebrity and popular culture that is imagined by Oates resembles Jean Baudrillard's world of "hyperreality in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life..."⁶ Oates is both disappointed and resentful that "the realm of hyperreal is more real than real, whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control our behavior."⁷ She is afraid that the media-dominated world of popular culture has become more attractive, and offers individuals more solace and pleasure, than reality itself.

Oates approaches celebrity culture as a symbol of the ultimate fragmentation of reality, and of our rootless existence and preference for fake images, rather than real things. I argue that Oates draws on Marilyn Monroe's life story as a critique of the way in which cinema and the tabloid press have slid into hyperreality, and to expose the artificiality of images and the commodification of stardom. Oates is concerned about the restriction of artistic freedom, and the compromises that artists are compelled to make in order to stay competitive. My analysis focuses on *Blonde*, while drawing on the other two narratives to shed light on issues such as myth-making and the exploitation of children in tabloid culture. In addition, I draw on sources that provide information on the cultural, social and political contexts in which these narratives are embedded, including studies of the media and biographies of Monroe.

In *Blonde*, the story starts in the early 1930s and finishes with the death of Marilyn Monroe in 1962. *Broke Heart Blues* and *My Sister, My Love*, meanwhile, are set in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s respectively. However, the kinds of issues affecting the celebrity world that Oates tackles in *Blonde* are even more importunate today than they were in the 1950s. Oates focuses on dilemmas such as the meaning of being an artist, a star and an image; personal fulfillment; and how stars negotiate the tricky path between cultural constraints, artistic freedom, and employers' and fans' demands – issues that often lurk behind the troubled lives of today's celebrities. For instance, owing to professional and private crises, celebrities such as Britney Spears and Michael Jackson are constantly in the newspaper headlines or discussed in news shows; while others, including Curt Cobain, Anna Nicole Smith, and Heath Ledger, have died premature deaths. Joyce Carol Oates wants to take a deeper look at the whole phenomenon of celebrity, and in doing so, deconstructs the mythical link between fame and happiness.

There is immense public interest in Marilyn Monroe, and it is impossible to ascertain just how many biographies, articles and studies have been written about her. Different sources indicate different numbers, including hundreds of biographies. The myth of Monroe has been sustained by facts about her life, memories, and invented stories. Furthermore, as Norman Mailer points out, Monroe contradicted herself in interviews, creating disparities between her claims and those of the people who knew her. In turn, every author is searching for his or her own truth regarding this icon. Oates also imagines Monroe from her own perspective, giving a lot of attention to the idea of Norma Jeane⁸ as the quintessential American girl.

Blonde is written from Marilyn Monroe's point of view, allowing Oates to reveal her own perceptions and interpret facts through Marilyn's eyes. In the Author's Note, Oates lists the sources that she used to write the novel, and warns the reader that it "is a radically distilled 'life' in the form of fiction, and, for all its length, synecdoche is the principle of appropriation."⁹ Oates blends biographical and imagined facts from Marilyn Monroe's life, the elements of both real and imagined historical and cultural context, and renders them from her main character's perspective. Indeed, this mode of narration, which combines fiction and reality, mirrors Marilyn Monroe's life story, which today remains a mix of reality and a myth. The narrative is framed by images of death. The section, "Special Delivery" is bisected, with the narrative inserted in between. "There came death hurtling along the Boulevard in waning sepia light,"¹⁰ in the form of a delivery boy. More than 700 pages later, Marilyn Monroe accepts his parcel. Her life thus both starts and ends with death, emphasizing that any statement that we make about Monroe is a statement about a dead person; she can never argue with, correct nor contradict us. Like *Blonde*, any text about her is, for a large part, an invention.

Although Monroe's life story is "distilled," Oates's narrative still relies quite heavily on biographical facts. As such, *Blonde* is without doubt a symbolic tale of an underprivileged girl who became a globally recognizable icon, the ultimate embodiment of the American Dream. It is a book about the life of a celebrity; the desire to be famous; hard work and relentless competition; the insecurity that lies at the heart of the acting profession, and the substance abuse that results as actors try to cope. Furthermore, we can easily recognize Oates's other female American characters in her portrayal of Norma Jeane Baker (Marilyn Monroe's real name), including Clara Walpole (*A Garden of Earthly Delights*); Maureen Wendall (*them*); and Marianne

Mulvaney (*We Were The Mulvaneys*), among others. As J.V. Creighton wrote in a review of *Blonde*,

Norma Jeane Baker is the quintessential Oates girl writ large. As so many Oatesian heroines before her, she is an intelligent, attractive young girl of an impoverished background, plagued with a weak sense of self, an overpowering, mentally unstable mother and a lost father. Like them, she longs for meaning, connection and deliverance.¹¹

In contrast to Clara Walpole or Maureen Wendall, who are calculating, shrewd and manipulative, Norma Jeane Baker (and, as she is later called Marilyn Monroe) lives a life of such uncertainty that it approaches the unreal. Symbolically, Norma Jeane, the true inner self, represents authenticity, roots, and intrinsic values; while Marilyn Monroe, into whom Norma Jeane slowly dissolves, represents celebrity culture, artifice, and fleeting existence.

Throughout Oates's oeuvre, we recognize her concern that modern American culture is experiencing a shift towards the sensational, transitory, visual and superficial. In *Blonde*, as well as in *My Sister, My Love* and *Broke Heart Blues*, Oates scrutinizes the effects of this shift. The transformation relates to an increasing preoccupation with "celebrity culture": the glamorous life of the rich and famous, as idolized on numerous television screens, magazines and Internet sites. The implication is often that fame can be easily achieved, and that everybody has the talent, imagination and ability to become a celebrity. As Jean M. Twenge argues, the generation of people born in the 1970s and onwards, "Generation Me" as she terms it, has been schooled to focus on improving self-esteem and feeling good about themselves. As a result, expectations are very high, and they expect their needs to be served first. "We fixate on self-esteem, and unthinkingly build narcissism,"¹² claims Twenge. Today's young people tend to lead more hedonistic lives while demanding undeservedly higher salaries than their parents, the baby-boomers. The Pew Research Center reports similar findings:

Asked about the life goals of those in their age group, most Gen Nexters [another term for Generation Me] say their generation's top goals are fortune and fame. Roughly eight-in-ten say people in their generation think getting rich is either the most important, or second most important, goal in their lives.

About half say that becoming famous also is valued highly by fellow Gen Nexters.¹³

Obsession with celebrity and this distorted understanding of what it means to be famous are frequently reflected in popular television shows, such as the “Dr. Phil” show. During one such show, for instance, a flight attendant declares, “I introduce myself as Tiffany, but you can call me Princess. I do live a jet-setting lifestyle, just like a celebrity.” Tiffany goes on to say:

I became a flight attendant in the hopes that it would open doors for my modeling career. Doing the safety demo on the airplane totally excites me because everybody is paying attention to me. It’s kind of a little rush inside. I’m still hoping for my big break. I would sacrifice anything to be famous. If my name were a household name, it would totally just light me up inside.¹⁴

Tiffany acts in ways that she imagines would befit a celebrity: giving orders, for instance, and asking her husband to be her chauffeur and carry her umbrella for her. Likewise, in *Blonde*, Marilyn Monroe’s inner voice tells her, “Carry yourself like a princess … And soon you will be one.”¹⁵ Tiffany is enacting the same rite. Dr. Phil asks if she is doing anything to make her dream come true, but Tiffany admits that she actually has no strategy to work on.

Looking more closely at the Dr. Phil show’s website, we see that the public’s obsession with fame and celebrity is itself a key topic of interest. The shows’ titles speak for themselves: “Celebrity Obsessed,” “Moving Past a Celebrity Obsession,” “Reality Check” and so on. The show portrays adults, just like Tiffany, who want to become famous simply for the sake of being famous. Children are also being pressurized or encouraged by their parents into seeking a career in show business, as the programs’ titles suggest: “Too Rich Too Young,” “Stage Parents,” “Sexy Too Soon.” Like the Rampikes in *My Sister, My Love*, such parents are rarely concerned about their children’s development or personalities. All of their attention is focused on developing an existing or imagined talent and enabling the prodigy to be discovered, regardless of the child’s wishes. The novel’s narrator, Skyler, is crippled when he performs a gymnastics exercise for which he is too small, and falls; and his sister, Bliss, must continue with her intensive figure-skating training, despite wetting the bed, sleepwalking, and biting her nails.¹⁶

Ellis Cashmore points out that today, having attracted the media's attention, people do not need to have special qualities in order to remain in the spotlight. While the public's attention was once fixated on celebrity, the emphasis has shifted from the extraordinary to the ordinary. As such, people prefer "to read about everyday events in the lives of fantastic people rather than fantastic events in the lives of ordinary people."¹⁷ The story of John Reddy Heart in *Broke Heart Blues* reflects this shift; as I show later in this chapter, this character is transformed from being a lower-class classmate into a celebrated hero, just because his arrest for murder was reported in the papers and on television. David Giles indicates that in modern times, "the need to be discovered in one's life-time"¹⁸ is deeply compelling. Since the period of fame is even shorter than it used to be, some artists are unable to remain at the centre of attention; and for some, the loss of fame turns out to be worse than suicide. Or, as we see in *Blonde*, they become addicted to drugs and sedative medication.

Another key issue that Oates addresses in *Blonde* is that of the sexualization of society. In her Foreword to *Sex in Consumer Culture*, Jennings Bryant suggests that at the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries,

sex had thoroughly permeated consumer culture, was so readily accessible to anyone at any age, and was so distorted by ulterior commercial motives, that commercial pandering and incredible hypersexuality had mangled and perverted that which is natural and beautiful about sexual behavior.¹⁹

The articles in the volume analyze how sex is used to market products, sexualize the media and promote individuals. As we shall see later in this chapter, in *Blonde*, Marilyn Monroe is made to expose herself to the public on screen, and she also poses naked for photographers. A key question, with regard to such sexualization, is how audiences are affected and what meanings they associate with what they see, hear and experience. One of the authors, Debra Merskin, concludes that "what is presented in fashion ads is pornographic," and that it "normalizes viewing women as only sexual, girls as sexually stimulating and available, and violence as the next level of activity and excitement."²⁰ An analysis of adverts for digital cameras reveals that these "make light of sexual relationships without acknowledging the emotional, physical, political and cultural implications of sexual activity."²¹ The use of sexualized images in marketing and advertising undoubtedly affects the behavior of audiences, and shapes our values. In *My Sister, My*

Love, Oates refers a number of times to the sexualization of young girls, some as young as six, who are made up and dressed to attract adult attention on the ice rink; usually “white lace panties are flashing beneath”²² a Gretel costume or a “sparkly Vegas-showgirl costume.”²³ In doing so, these children’s parents hope to attract the attention of the media, and for their child to become famous. As far as the effect of such “sexualized” media exposure is concerned, it is probably responsible, in part, for changing teenage sexual behavior. Twenge’s research identifies such a shift in sexual behavior among young teenagers: they become sexually active at a younger age, consider sex to be a recreational activity, distinguish between emotions and sex, and avoid relationships. As the title of her book suggests, young Americans “are more miserable than ever before”; learning to feel good about themselves has not made them happier.

Character and Personality

The historian and essayist, Warren I. Susman, suggests that prior to 1900, the popular vision of the self in the United States was defined by the word “character.” In public discourse, this concept was accompanied by such words as “citizenship, duty, democracy, work, building, golden deeds, outdoor life, conquest, honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity, and above all, manhood. The stress was clearly moral; and the interest was almost always in some sort of higher moral law.”²⁴ He points out that the most popular quotation of the time was Emerson’s definition of character, “Moral order through the medium of individual nature.”²⁵ Examples of such “characters” include Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln, politicians and industrialists, self-made men. This character type has much in common with the *inner-directed personality* of the sociologist David Riesman: a person who is inner-directed has “a highly individualized character” and “is directed toward generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals.”²⁶

Susman goes on to argue that, together with the industrial developments that led to mass production, mass consumption, and a mass society, the vision of the self shifted from moral and social achievement to a focus on personality. This latter concept was often associated with adjectives such as “fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful, creative, dominant, forceful,”²⁷ which are epithets that also relate to modern celebrity culture. If character was achieved by “self-control,” so personality had to be created by developing self-confidence and the ability to charm others. Indeed, this is a key characteristic of Riesman’s other-directed personality type: such people focus on others’ reactions towards them, and adapt their behavior when

necessary. Riesman suggests that this type has emerged “in very recent years in the upper-middle class,”²⁸ a claim that might well have been true when his study appeared in the 1950s. Today, however, a similar personality type is often identified in different layers of society. Susman believes that both visions of the self – that of character and of personality – emerged as a response to the social structures of the time. The concept of “character” was more valuable during a period of industrialization and in a producer-oriented society; while the notion of “personality” has greater resonance in an era of mass production, and in a consumer society in which to “be somebody” means to have power and to be noticed. (Robert Bellah has developed a comparable view of the individual in a modern society, in his notion of the culture of manager and therapist.²⁹)

Susman thus suggests that for each period, there are differing visions of the meaning of life and differing perceptions of what people’s goals should be. If the “self-made man” valued achievements in engineering, industry and science, and found fulfillment in these areas, then the “personality” type is inclined to develop self-esteem and to seek fulfillment in fame. Or to use Riesman’s terms, the inner-directed type is interested in making a product, whereas the other-directed type is interested in a product to the extent that it is valued by others and attracts attention. The inner-directed type is “product-minded,” while the other-directed type is “people-minded.”³⁰ As a result, society’s understanding of the American Dream has also shifted from being founded on the Protestant work ethic and the idea of achievement through hard work, to achieving fame and “making a fast buck”:

...the American Dream of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, an Andrew Carnegie rested on a sense of *character*; those of Douglas Fairbanks and May Pickford [one of the first Hollywood stars] rested on *personality*. They were celebrities, people whose fame rested not on talent, however defined, but simply on being famous. One of the strangest paradoxes of subsequent American history would be the histories of other Americans, among them Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, who emerged from highly particular cultural communities possessing enormous talent and yet who trivialized, even discarded, their gifts in a desperate desire to live the Dream of the Coast.³¹

J. Cullen compares the legacies of Franklin and Carnegie with those of Fairbanks and Pickford: the former left behind “libraries that remain with

us"; the latter, "fading pictures of the world that never was."³² Yet this "world" is so attractive that its reach has expanded rapidly, especially during the last decade of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries. Making a fortune and living a life of adventure have always been elements of the American Dream. In Hollywood, the American Dream has gained an extra dimension: that of rapidly achievable fame, regardless of talent. Subsequently, the concept of the meaning of life has also had to shift from traditional values rooted in Protestant ethics, to postmodern values such as enjoying quick success, finding fame early in life, and performing successfully in front of the media – a shift from something that is tangible and real, to something that is synthetic and artificial, even fake.

In *Blonde*, Oates relates the Dream of the Coast in a parable, "Walled Garden," which appears in a chapter that is symbolically entitled "City of Sand." In this parable, Oates parodies the centrality of good looks, charm and sexual favors in a person's bid for fame. A "fragile and breakable" little girl may only enter the Garden (Oates's metaphor for a star's residence) if she is able to make the "ugly, green-skinned gnome" doorkeeper "take notice" of her, "admire" her, "desire" her and "love" her.³³ The most important lesson that is taught to the little girl by her fairy godmother is that "your body is a doll; your body is for others to admire and to pet; your body is to be used by others, not used by you; your body is a luscious fruit for others to bite into and savor; your body is for others, not for you."³⁴ The girl thus has to use her body to seduce the doorkeeper. The moral of this parable evokes the idea of the "happy hooker," a prototype of personal success that, according to Christopher Lasch, has replaced that of Horatio Alger, a prototypical Protestant work ethic character. Although the happy hooker makes a living in the "milieu of interpersonal relationships," and "sells herself for a living [but] her seductiveness hardly signifies a wish to be well liked," she "remains a loner, dependent on others only as a hawk depends on chickens."³⁵ Like Susman and Rojek, Christopher Lasch insists that in modern times, the "ethic of pleasure has replaced the ethic of achievement."³⁶

In *Blonde*, Oates's portrayal of Marilyn Monroe combines Horatio Alger and the happy hooker. Monroe transforms herself from being a half-orphan and a "nobody" into somebody who graces the silver screen and numerous magazine covers, "an LA-born girl who'd clawed her way up from the gutter."³⁷ She is driven to achieve, and while she works hard, she also uses and abuses her body on the way to fame. On the one hand, she develops her talent, learns to act, and finds fame as an actress; on the other hand, she indulges in hedonistic pleasures and encourages others to join her. Oates

believes that Monroe treated her image like one of Norma Jeane's roles, and calculatingly used it to manipulate others. While she exploited her charms for personal gain, unlike the happy hooker, she really did crave love. According to Oates, while she realized that glamour was phony, she embraced glamour nevertheless.³⁸

Image

The work of Daniel J. Boorstin reveals how the media creates and manipulates phony and glamorous images. Boorstin was one of the first scholars to analyze the construction of image in the US in the early 1960s, a society that was dominated by the mass media. He argues that the most important characteristic of an image is its synthetic quality. An image "is a studiously crafted personality profile of an individual, institution, corporation, product, or service. It is a value-caricature, shaped in three dimensions, of synthetic materials."³⁹ According to Boorstin, values have traditionally had an intrinsic quality, in that they carry something that has survived over time and provide us with a certain standard. In modern America, however, values are something that "a society has made for itself,"⁴⁰ an understanding which ignores the historical, religious and cultural dimensions of values. Boorstin's reference to images being "value-caricatures" implies a deviation from the true meaning of values, in order to cater to the tastes of a particular group. "An image is a visible public 'personality' as distinguished from an inward private 'character'."⁴¹

Boorstin's distinction echoes W. Susman's distinction between character and personality in popular visions of the self, as discussed above. This public personality can be adjusted according to a client's needs and an intended purpose, while the client's real "self" remains conveniently hidden behind the image. As a result, the outside world communicates with the image, not the person behind it. In the end, we are surrounded by images of people, not real people, and by props – images of things, rather than real things. When we see or hear celebrities, we are not being exposed to the individuals themselves, but to images that have more often than not been constructed by program makers. We often consider celebrities to be heroes or role models, but, according to Boorstin, in doing so, we embrace a world of pseudo-events:

Celebrities are made by the people. The hero stood for outside standards. The celebrity is a tautology. We still try to make our celebrities stand in for the heroes we no longer have, or for those who have been pushed out of our view. We forget that

the celebrities are known primarily for their well-knownness. And we imitate them as if they were cast in the mold of greatness. Yet the celebrity is usually nothing greater than a more-publicized version of us. In imitating him, in trying to dress like him, talk like him, we are simply imitating ourselves.⁴²

Furthermore, Boorstin points out that these days, heroes' fame is short-lived: celebrities are created and then quickly forgotten. This is certainly true for those stars whose "celebrity was built on their exposure in a particular" role, as Graeme Turner asserts, and who are forced to leave the industry because they lack "credibility"⁴³ in any other role. As far as roles go, to some extent this observation is also applicable to Marilyn Monroe: the studios insisted that she should play a comic, stereotypical "dumb blonde," the role for which she became known. Nevertheless, in Marilyn Monroe's case, death did not lead to obscurity; rather, it brought her more fame, even though she is known for that particular image. Chris Rojek believes that "because celebrities are placed beyond ordinary experience," their physical death does not affect the "life" of their image.⁴⁴ Marilyn Monroe's image continues to live: at the end of the 20th century, accolades included Sexiest Female Movie Star of the 20th century (*Empire* magazine, 1995); Number One Sex Star of the Century (*Playboy*, 1998); Sex Symbol of the Century (*E! Online*, 1999); and Sexiest Woman of the Century (*People* magazine, 1999).⁴⁵

Over time, Marilyn Monroe's fame has only grown: not only is her image globally recognizable, but it has also been used as a means of expression by various artists, musicians, performers, impersonators, filmmakers, and writers. Many want to exploit the sexuality of her image; others see her as a stereotypical, slightly insecure and charming "girl-next-door;" others, still, as a symbol of popular culture. Andy Warhol, for instance, made her into a cliché. In Warhol's silkscreens, Marilyn Monroe's "mass produced" and reproduced, simplified portrait in non-representational colors places commodity culture at the level of art, blurring the boundaries between high and low culture. In her song "Vogue," meanwhile, Madonna includes Monroe's name among a list of other Hollywood stars; she sang "Material Girl" as a tribute to Monroe; and she herself adopted Monroe's image for artistic purposes. Joyce Carol Oates also uses Marilyn Monroe to illustrate her concerns about modern America's vacuous obsession with fame and sex. In a sense, Monroe's image implies a popular, light and superficial mode of existence.

In *Blonde*, Oates takes her own approach to Monroe's image: in Oates's hands, from being a real person, a movie star and a subject of biographies, Monroe becomes a character in a novel. Her life story is told mainly from her point of view, but Oates uses the third person singular. Oates is at great pains to reflect the complexity of Monroe's character, and to exploit its contradictions. As Joanne Creighton puts it:

She [Monroe] is a gifted actress because she understands and appropriates the lives of the characters she portrays and because she has an uncanny ability to project her sexualized image before the camera; she has much less success assuming the persona of her own self. As Marilyn Monroe assumes ascendancy, Norma Jeane is eclipsed. She is both a star and a joke. She is at once adored and abhorred, lusted after and loathed.⁴⁶

At the same time, Oates uses Monroe as a means of expressing her own views on celebrity culture in general, and on Monroe in particular. As such, the narrative puts Monroe's life story in cultural perspective: it consists of a fusion of cultural contexts, backgrounds, perspectives, and the imagined inner life of Norma Jeane and Marilyn Monroe. Oates suggests that the studios, the audiences, the fans, and the actress herself all played a part in the destruction of the "real, quivering person" that she imagines Norma Jeane to have been. Indeed, in Oates's mind, Norma Jeane represents reality, while Marilyn Monroe is a sign or image. A link between reality and image remains so long as Norma Jeane survives. In the course of the novel, however, this "quintessential Oates girl"⁴⁷ gradually dissolves into Monroe's image. This process reflects a transformation, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, from an image that "perverts a basic reality" into an image that "masks the absence of a basic reality."⁴⁸ Marilyn Monroe's sign is one that balances between "signs which dissimilate something" and "signs which dissimulate that there is nothing."⁴⁹ In the narrative, Oates suggests that the studios only viewed her image in a technical way; for them, the crucial "real" person is a body that can easily be adjusted to fit a particular purpose. The studios have a polarized attitude, portraying Marilyn Monroe as either a "tramp" or a star, depending on the moment:

Sure, we invented MARILYN MONROE. The platinum-blond hair was The Studio's idea. The Mmmm! Name. The little girl baby-voice bullshit. I saw the tramp one day on the lot, a 'star-

let' looking like a high school tart. No style, but Jesus was that little broad built! The face wasn't perfect so we had the teeth fixed, & the nose. Something was wrong with the nose. Maybe hairline was uneven & had to be improved by electrolysis, unless that was Hayworth.

MARILYN MONROE was a robot designed by the studio. Too fucking bad we couldn't patent it.⁵⁰

Marilyn Monroe's image thus meets Daniel Boorstin's definition of an image: the latter has to be "synthetic, believable, passive, vivid, simplified and ambiguous."⁵¹ Examining Boorstin's description of each component of an image, we see that most, if not all, are geared towards the manipulation of clients or of the public, for the benefit of a particular company. An image is "created to serve a purpose"⁵² and although we know that what we see is not "real," we nevertheless choose to believe it. Jean Baudrillard's prediction thus comes true: "signs of the real [substitute] for the real itself."⁵³ Oates's narrative asserts that Monroe, both as an actress and as a human being, has been reduced to being an image, the purpose of which is to lure audiences to cinemas, to sell, and to make profits for the studios. Richard Dyer, in turn, argues that: "Monroe was understood above all through her sexuality – it was her embodiment of current ideas of sexuality that made her seem real, alive, vital."⁵⁴

In an interpretation that is similar to that of Richard Dyer, the image of Oates's Marilyn Monroe is a compilation of various desires; namely, what the general public wants to see on the big screen and on magazine covers. Hers is an assemblage of features that trigger sexual desires and elicit a desire to be famous, thus luring audiences to cinemas. For the women in the audience, Marilyn's image might induce a wish to identify with her and copy her style, so that they might also become famous or so that men might desire them. Oates emphasizes that Norma Jeane was a beautiful woman, but that for public appearances, this natural beauty had to be destroyed and a new image created:

The day of the *Blondes* premiere, a half-dozen expert hands laid into the Blond Actress as chicken pluckers might lay into poultry carcasses. Her hair was shampooed and given a permanent and its shadowy roots bleached with peroxide so powerful they had to turn a fan on the Blond Actress to save her from asphyxiation and her hair then rinsed another time and set on

enormous pink plastic rollers and roaring hair dryer lowered onto her head like a machine devised to administer electric shock. Her face and throat were steamed, chilled and creamed. Her body was bathed and oiled, its unsightly hairs removed. She was powdered, perfumed, painted, and set to dry. Her fingernails and toenails were painted in a brilliant crimson to match her neon mouth. Whitey the make-up man had labored for more than an hour when he saw to his chagrin a subtle asymmetry in the Blond Actress's darkened eyebrows and removed them entirely and redid them. The beauty mark was re-located by a tenth of a fraction of an inch, then prudently restored to its original position. False eye-lashes were glued into place.⁵⁵

This description of how a woman is transformed into an erotic and glamorous object that will elicit the desire of large audiences, regardless of gender, age or nationality, assumes a high degree of overstatement and stereotyping. On the one hand, a unique image is created: that of Marilyn Monroe. On the other, any feature that might somehow personalize this image is removed or covered with make-up. The body is "stitched" into gowns (or "straightjackets,"⁵⁶ as Oates sometimes calls them) so tightly that the woman inside can hardly walk. The ultimate "Marilyn Monroe" is a "wind-up sex doll, an inflatable platinum-blond doll" in a dress of a very thin "nude" fabric, with "rhinestones so that MARILYN MONROE would shine and glitter," wearing "absolutely nothing beneath."⁵⁷ This is truly Boorstin's "value-caricature" of a 1950s American girl: a "teaser" in a consensus culture that is dominated by traditional family values. Nobody is interested in whether Marilyn Monroe has something to say, or indeed whether she has a voice. Her first agent, Mr. Shinn, puts it plainly:

'Marilyn' doesn't have to understand or think. Jesus, no. She has only to be. She's a knockout and she's got talent and nobody wants tortured metaphysical crap out of that luscious mouth.⁵⁸

Marilyn Monroe's sexuality was the most prominent part of her image. In *Marilyn*, Norman Mailer describes Monroe's sex appeal as follows:

She gave the feeling that if you made love to her, why then how could you not move more easily into sweets and the purchase of the full promise of future sweets, move into tender heavens where your flesh would be restored. She would ask no price. She was not the dark contract of those passionate brunette depths that speak of blood, vows taken for life, and the furies of vengeance if you are untrue to the depth of passion, no, Marilyn suggested sex might be difficult and dangerous with others, but ice cream with her.⁵⁹

Richard Dyer, meanwhile, argues that Monroe's popularity was grounded in her expression of ideas about female sexuality. In 1950s America, at a time when the first issues of *Playboy* had been published and Dr. Kinsey's reports had just appeared, these ideas mattered a great deal. Quoting Norman Mailer and others, Dyer asserts that Monroe "incarnated" an "image of sexuality for men"⁶⁰ which had two key characteristics: readiness and narcissism. Analyzing Monroe's body language, clothing, gestures, poses and other non-verbal means of communication, Dyer concludes that for the most part, Monroe projected an image of submission and desirability, and only in *The Misfits* did she begin "to hint at a for-itself female sexuality."⁶¹

Oates sees Monroe's sex appeal as more of a disadvantage than an advantage. In an interview for *Playboy* in 1993, Oates states that sex appeal is a handicap, rather than a privilege:

The most attractive girls in school were the ones who ended up getting married and having babies right after the graduation. In a sense their lives are finished. So being very beautiful and having a strong appeal for the opposite sex is a handicap, though it's not perceived that way when one is young.⁶²

In Oates's novel, Marilyn Monroe's second husband, Ex-Athlete, has a negative perception of her image; in his view, she is presented to the public as "a street hooker," she "is displaying herself like meat," "sewn into her dresses," "hips swiveling as she walks," and "breasts spilling out of her clothes."⁶³ His attitude might be read as a representation of traditional understandings of morality, and how wives and husbands ought to behave in 1950s America. Her third husband, the Playwright, tries to look behind the "heavy lidded eyes and sultry gash of a mouth" and the "voluptuous body," into her soul of an "abandoned child"; since "he, the Playwright, a superior man,

knew her differently and could never be so deceived.”⁶⁴ There is irony in Oates’s depiction of his reasoning, because like other men, the Playwright also has a sexual interest in her. Nevertheless, he endeavors to help her to develop into a serious actress and into a “real woman” (in Oates’s terms). At the end of their marriage, however, Monroe’s “image” wins, and she is overcome by her hallucinations and addictions. Oates’s attitude towards this latter image was very well expressed in the same interview for *Playboy*, well before *Blonde* was written:

I recently saw *The Misfits* on video and I was really struck by Marilyn Monroe as a kind of female impersonator. There were real women in that movie and they walked around in regular shoes, and then she would come on the screen completely confectionary, her hair, her manner, her walk, her physical being. It was as if she were a female impersonator in a way that we don’t experience women now – stuffed into a dress, teetering on high heels.⁶⁵

Many of Monroe’s lovers identify the woman with her image, which, in Norman Mailer’s words, suggests that sex with her would be “like ice cream”: easy and commitment-free. Oates’s novel contains numerous sex scenes that depict Marilyn Monroe with different partners. In these, she plays multiple roles: Marilyn Monroe, Norma Jeane, and her film roles, including Rose from *Niagara!*, and Nell from *Don’t Bother to Knock*. Of these, the most morally degrading scene is one set in a New York hotel, where she has been flown in from Hollywood to meet the President. Here we see Marilyn Monroe treated as a low-class hooker: she is invited into a bed that still carries the traces of another woman’s make-up on the sheets, and has to perform oral sex while the President is talking on the phone. According to the President’s Pimp, she is a “sexpot Marilyn Monroe, who was a junkie, a nymphomaniac, suicidal, and schizzy.”⁶⁶ If Norman Mailer romanticizes Marilyn Monroe’s sex appeal, Oates’s sex scenes are by comparison rather negative, naturalistic, and not infrequently demeaning, experienced as flashbacks and including lapses of memory. Often such sex constitutes nothing other than exploitation and abuse by higher-status men.

Moreover, sex often is the currency used by Monroe to pay studio bosses for various favors, including career opportunities. When she is first hired, it is not her skill as an actress but the shape of her buttocks that attracts a director’s attention: “Sweet Jesus. Look at the ass on that little girl, will you?”⁶⁷

Mr. Z, a studio boss, forces her to have anal sex. In an interview, Oates explains her approach: “She was absolutely a victim of the casting couch – that expression is valuable. She never had any choice about that. It went on for years and years. It’s because she came from such a lower economic level.”⁶⁸ Double standards are central to Oates’s portrayal of Monroe’s sexuality. The Studio, for example, encourages her promiscuity and is quick to promote it, but also treats her with great disrespect: “‘that tramp,’ they [the studio bosses] called her.”⁶⁹ The studio only forgives her for a nude photo scandal “after I [Monroe] sucked all their cocks one by one around the table.”⁷⁰

Although Monroe’s image is based on sex appeal, in Oates’s narrative, the actress herself feels humiliated when she is seen only as an object of others’ lust. The extent of these feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness is revealed in a party scene that takes place in an oil mega-millionaire’s villa. In this scene, Marilyn Monroe is thinking of herself as Norma Jeane, which makes the sexual advances even more demeaning:

At last they moved upon her.
She’d been waiting, and she knew.
Like hyenas circling. Grinning.
George Raft! A low suggestive voice. ‘*Hel-lo*, “Marilyn.”’
Bat-faced Mr. Z, head of production at The Studio. “‘Marilyn,’
hel-lo.’

Mr. S and Mr. D and Mr. T. And others Norma Jeane could not have identified. And the Texas oil mega-millionaire who was a principle investor in *Niagara*. Their gargoyle faces shot with shadow as in an old German Expressionist silent film. As V looked on from a short distance the men touched Norma Jeane, drew their sausage fingers over her, bare shoulders, bare arms, breasts, hips, and belly, they leaned close and laughed softly together, with a wink in V’s direction. *We’ve had this one. This one, we’ve all had.*⁷¹

Such episodes suggest that Oates’s Monroe has mixed feelings about the image that she has to project. She experiences the confines of being a sex symbol as both degrading and, in the longer run, destructive. Oates has to admit, however, that Monroe also enjoyed the power of her image, and the fame and attention that it brought her. Oates makes this clear in her descriptions of Monroe’s visits to Japan and Korea, or the crowds of American fans

waiting to see her at the film premieres, or the fan mail: “Fame was wildfire no one could control, even the studio bosses who were taking credit for it. Bouquets of flowers from these men! Invitations to lunch, dinner.”⁷²

One of Marilyn Monroe’s biographers, Anthony Summers, reports that in one interview Monroe claimed, “Men who tried to proposition me made me sick. I didn’t accept...”⁷³ However, Summers believes that she told the truth in another interview, which was conducted a couple of years before she died:

When I started modeling, it [sex] was like part of the job. All girls did. They weren’t shooting all those sexy pictures just to sell peanut butter in an ad, or get a layout in some magazine. They wanted to sample their merchandise, and if you didn’t go along, there were twenty-five girls who would. It wasn’t any big dramatic tragedy. Nobody ever got cancer from sex.⁷⁴

Contrary to Oates’s portrayal, the real Monroe does not appear offended or upset by the fact that she had to advance her career by giving sexual favors. The quotation above suggests that she did not feel herself to be a victim of “the casting couch”; rather, she viewed such behavior as a part of life and a means of furthering her career. While it is probable that in such circumstances, this attitude helped Monroe to survive and to become famous, this does not justify such abuses of power. By painting Monroe as a victim, Oates is able to expose the maltreatment of women, not only in 1950s Hollywood, but also today.

Thus, in *Blonde*, the studios regard Marilyn Monroe as a brand, a sexually-loaded image that sells. The actress has virtually no rights to her own body: “The Studio meant to market the blond woman’s body but only on its own strict terms.”⁷⁵ Any hint of damage to the image had to be transformed into new marketing and money-making opportunities. The public exposure of her nude Miss Golden Dreams photos could not be allowed to become a commercial disaster, and was turned into a success (although, given her sexual image, nude photos must have only reinforced her popularity). As Leroy Ashby claims, “the religion of Hollywood is money.” Historically, “the ultimate arbiter of entertainment as a whole in the United States has been revered profit motive, which most Americans celebrated as crucial to the nation’s success.”⁷⁶ The adulation of fame in popular culture is strongly intertwined with the money that can be made out of celebrity. Not all popular artists have the strength of character and business acumen of someone like Madonna, enabling them to remain in control.

In *My Sister, My Love*, Oates explores similar tensions surrounding fame, popularity and the exploitation of children. Oates describes how the image of Bliss, a skating prodigy, is created. At the age of four, the child's name is changed from Edna Louise to Bliss; she is made up, and her hair is highlighted. A little later, "her hairline has to be raised,"⁷⁷ and she has to smile the "little doll-smile that Mummy insisted upon for Bliss's skating performances."⁷⁸ Bliss is remade and recreated until she does not recognize herself:

A shyly/coyly smiling little girl who looks more four years old than six, with wide dark-blue eyes and thick eyelashes, a rose-bud smile, platinum blond hair falling in a wavy cascade to her narrow shoulders. The girl is posing on the ice, in beautiful white kidskin Junior Miss Elite ice skates and in the strawberry satin-and-sequin skating dress with its perky ballerina tulle skirt, a snug bodice, flesh-colored fishnet stockings and just a peek of white-lace panties beneath.⁷⁹

If in *Blonde*, Oates retains a connection with reality via the person of Norma Jeane, in *My Sister, My Love*, this link is severed: "Bliss" is a name, not an artistic pseudonym. Edna Louise's normal schoolgirl existence has to accommodate Bliss, the skating talent: she is tutored at home, trains every day, and has to attend shooting sessions at a modeling agency. She, like Marilyn Monroe, also has nothing to say; and any attempts at protest are ignored by her mother, who does not want to see that Bliss sucks her thumb, wets the bed, sleepwalks, and is lagging behind in her intellectual development. If Marilyn Monroe's pictures are used as pinups, so too, in every probability, are Bliss's: the young girls' competitions are attended by lone men "hoping to be inconspicuous, even as they cradle cameras, camcorders, and binoculars in their laps."⁸⁰ Oates projects the life of an adult star, such as Monroe, onto the person of a small girl, in order to expose the irrationality and folly of a world that is fascinated with the media and tabloids.

One of the most famous child stars of the recent past is Britney Spears, now an "out of control"⁸¹ artist. Lisa Appignanesi writes in *The Guardian* that "the 'young, happy and fun' Britney has been transformed into the mad, bad and sad woman of psychiatric wards and courtrooms – a woman confined by her father's legal order of 'conservatorship,' which puts him in charge of her life and estate."⁸² She argues this pop singer, who became as popular as Madonna, has been treated as incapable of taking care of herself because she is a woman:

Is it likely that a father would have dared proceed in the same way with an adult son and received such ready acquiescence from the courts and a good part of the media? No fathers have appeared to take legal charge of the countless male pill-popping pop stars whose language and behavior are less than clean and who live out some of the wildest dreams of the adult children we all sometimes are. But women, it seems, like their Victorian great-grandmothers, still need to be taken in hand and charged with madness.⁸³

Like Marilyn Monroe, who in *Blonde* has no rights over her body, Britney Spears has no rights to her wealth, and has to struggle for custody of her children. When after childbirth, her sexual image fails to meet the standards demanded of modern pin-ups, she is rejected by her audience. “Britney could only be ‘mad’ for challenging our ambivalence about the female body in that adamantly upfront way,”⁸⁴ writes Lisa Appignanesi.

Research suggests that today, sex is used for advertising purposes to a much greater extent than in the 1950s or 1960s. In music videos, as Julie Andsager argues,

sexuality is a much more prominent feature with videos continually pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable. Near nudity, lesbian chic, and (compared to network television) more-than-suggestive depictions of sexuality abound. Thus many artists attempt to compete for airplay, media attention, and record sales by exploiting their sexuality to a greater degree.⁸⁵

In order to boost record sales and to attract the media, Julie Andsager explains, producers have developed a new marketing strategy, that of “the sexual stunt on live programs.”⁸⁶ One can find numerous examples of this strategy, including the 2003 French kiss between Madonna and Britney Spears on a music awards show, and the exposure of one of Janet Jackson’s breasts at a Super Bowl halftime performance six months later. Julie Andsager concludes that only time will tell whether “audiences will continue to notice and evaluate female artists for their sexuality and where the boundaries of such strategies are.”⁸⁷

Popular culture has always had to maneuver between promotion strategies that are based on titillation and stars’ notorious reputations, and the codes of conduct imposed by morality watchdogs. LeRoy Ashby shows that by the

end of the 1940s, pulp-style paperback covers “accented sex”⁸⁸ as one of the three Ss – “sex, sadism and the smoking gun” – for marketing purposes. The most popular paperback novels were those packed with “urban sin, corruption, pluralism, and scarlet women.”⁸⁹ In 1952, however, the political establishment expressed its outrage at this immoral literature, first blaming communists for spreading perversion in America and then, after an investigation had been carried out by a Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, concluding that “greedy businessmen” were responsible for “disseminating immorality” and extolling “sexual aberrations.”⁹⁰

Even when censorship prevented “sexual aberrations” in one genre, they would appear in another. The early 1950s marked the beginning of a sexual revolution in America; Dr. Alfred Kinsey had already published his report on male sexuality (1948), and the one on female sexuality would be published in 1953. At the time, there were magazines for men, some of which were sold under the counter, but these promoted the idea that sex was “dirty and dangerous.” *Playboy*, by contrast, “took a recreational view of sex,”⁹¹ similar to that projected by Marilyn Monroe. *Playboy*’s target readership consisted of “young urban males who had gone to college and hoped to succeed in business or a profession,”⁹² in contrast with the blue-collar worker, the traditional reader of men’s magazines. The first issue of *Playboy* to feature Marilyn Monroe’s photos sold more than 50,000 copies.⁹³ That such impressive sales had been achieved by a sex-related magazine, along with the commotion caused by Kinsey’s reports, indicated a challenge to the traditional cultural consensus, raising doubts about whether “the family was a single perfect universe – instead of a complicated, fragile mechanism of conflicting political and emotional pulls.”⁹⁴

Sex also beat off the competition in the early 1960s. In Sarah Chur-chwell’s biography of Monroe, we learn that “Monroe’s nudes knocked Taylor off the front pages.”⁹⁵ With this photo session, Marilyn Monroe entered history as the “first major star to pose nude on set, while a star.”⁹⁶ Norman Mailer reports that even before negotiations with her agent had finished, her pictures had appeared in magazines in more than 30 countries.⁹⁷ Marketing based on nude images formed a stark contrast to the images of happy housewives portrayed in women’s magazines, showing women to be “relentlessly happy, liberated from endless household tasks by wondrous new machines they had just bought.”⁹⁸

Oates explicitly disapproves of the images’ sexual connotations, considering them to be disrespectful and in bad taste. In the interview with *Playboy* cited above, Oates doubts whether Marilyn Monroe’s image really was “an

ideal of female beauty or was it, even then, exaggerated and a little absurd?"⁹⁹ An answer to this question might be gleaned from an article that was written by Thomas Harris in 1957. Having studied Monroe's films and anything written about the actress between 1951 and 1956, he claims that, "it was the playmate image, which nourished by the acceptance of her picture, skyrocketed her to an almost allegoric position as the symbolic object of illicit male sexual desire."¹⁰⁰ He compares this image to that of Grace Kelly, who is described in such terms as "cool, lady, genteel, elegant, reserved, patrician"¹⁰¹ in features and reviews.

Marilyn Monroe's biographers often make a distinction between Monroe's image and the actual person behind it. Oates also makes this distinction: at the beginning of the novel, Norma Jeane's story encompasses a number of elements of celebrity culture, mostly in the form of dreams. In the course of the novel, the image slowly takes over, until Norma Jeane completely fades into Marilyn Monroe. There is a certain irony in Sarah Churchwell's assertion that the Marilyn Monroe myth is as follows: "trapped behind the innocent happy fiction of 'Marilyn Monroe' there was a suffering real woman, whom we hardly know. She became a cautionary tale in death, a casualty of her attempts to live a lie."¹⁰² In her conclusion, however, Churchwell does not deny that Marilyn Monroe was also a victim, among other things.

Blonde can also be read as a story about growing up and personal development, of which the "Marilyn brand" was a part. Oates has said that she wanted to reveal Monroe's "poetic or inner self." Oates has not revealed the actual actress's "poetic or inner soul", however: in *Blonde*, this actress is imagined. Her psychology, her inner dialogues, her fantasies and experiences, her feelings about her image – all are fictional. For Oates, the main character in *Blonde* is a bright American girl who dreams of becoming a famous actress, and who later struggles with the tension between her enormous popularity and its many consequences, and her private self. In spite of all the negative events and emotions surrounding this girl's image, the latter is the foundation on which her acting career and her fame were built. As such, Oates has chosen to expose the misogyny and hypocrisy of the film world, and to dramatize its effects upon a young actress.

Artistic Freedom

In *Blonde*, Oates uses the relationship between Marilyn Monroe, Cass Chaplin and Eddy G. to reveal the actress trapped behind Monroe's image. Although these two young men really existed and were known to Monroe,

the latter's biographers do not write explicitly about their relationship. From this we can assume that Marilyn Monroe did not have intensive contact with either of them. Perhaps because of this, Oates takes the liberty of inventing a great many details in her descriptions of their three-way friendship and love affair, which lasted for more than nine years. Their relationship is mostly set in the bedroom, at night, with the exception of a few scenes in which Oates imagines them driving around or having sex on the beach. Both young men are depicted as the vain sons of famous fathers; they are bohemians with bad reputations. Despite their narcissism, irresponsibility and egocentrism, Marilyn Monroe feels more at home with them than with any of her husbands: “*they would make [her] life possible. They would make Rose possible, and beyond.*”¹⁰³

In the “Gemini” scenes (Gemini being the collective name that Oates gives to the trio; in addition to being Marilyn and Cass’s birth sign, it also implies a double nature), Marilyn Monroe is called both Norma and Norma Jeane. From the closeness between the three of them, we may assume that in these scenes, we are seeing the “natural” Norma Jeane as imagined by Oates. She does not have to put on an act when talking about the studio, her sexual life, her roles, and so forth. Cass Chaplin and Eddy G. also act as true judges of her artistic abilities, allowing Oates to state her own position via theirs. The scene at the premiere of *Niagara* is retold in Eddy G.’s voice; here, he reflects on the widely held opinion that Marilyn Monroe cannot act, and that she just plays herself:

... Cassie says to me, ‘This isn’t Norma. This is not our little Fishie.’ And the hell of it was, it wasn’t. This Rose was a total stranger. This was nobody we’d laid eyes on before. Out here, people thought ‘Marilyn Monroe’ was just playing herself. Every movie she made, no matter that it was different from the others, they’d find a way to dismiss it – ‘That broad can’t act. She’s just playing herself.’ But she was a born actress. She was a genius, if you believe in genius. Because Norma didn’t have a clue who she was, and she had to fill this emptiness in her. Each time she went out she had to invent her soul. Other people, we’re just empty; maybe in fact everybody’s soul is empty, but Norma Jeane was the one to know it.¹⁰⁴

Throughout the chapters entitled “The Woman 1949-1953” and “Marilyn 1953-1958,” Oates scatters episodes from Marilyn Monroe’s acting classes,

shooting films, and a brief spell of acting in a New York theatre studio. In these scenes, Oates reveals her view of Marilyn Monroe the actress: a woman who is hard-working, reads the classics, and learns how to act and sing. Far from being a “dumb blonde” who is only interested in looks, sex and easy fame, this Marilyn Monroe is driven by the fear of failure, the fear that she will be sent back “like a kicked dog, into the oblivion from which she’d just emerged.”¹⁰⁵ Acting is not only the meaning in her life, but life itself; for “to fail in her acting career was to fail at the life she’d chosen to justify her wrongful birth.”¹⁰⁶ In her case, she had to choose between being famous and being hired by the Hollywood studios, or being nothing, as she had been when she had been paid 50 dollars for posing for the famous Miss Golden Dreams photo. This Marilyn Monroe reminds us of Corky Corcoran from *What I Lived For*, another Oates character who believes that fulfillment in life lies in belonging to certain social circles. Corky Corcoran works very hard to achieve acceptance, and then to pay back his protectors by doing political and business favors, and serving them faithfully.

In the episode entitled “Rat Beauty,” Oates sets up a confrontation between two opposites, Brunette and Blond Actress. Brunette is an independent woman who imitates male behavior, and she “talked & smoked & laughed like a man from the gut;” while Blond Actress is a helpless, infantile female who “emitted faint breathy laughing noises as if not knowing what they were & meant.”¹⁰⁷ Brunette has a pragmatic take on acting: “Hollywood pays. That’s why we are here. We are higher class hookers. A hooker does not make a romance of hooking. She retires when she has saved enough.” Blond Actress, meanwhile, thinks that “acting is a life. Not just for money.”¹⁰⁸ The scene ends with Brunette “taking hold of the Blond Actress’s stricken baby face in both hands & kissing her full on the mouth.”¹⁰⁹

This kiss may be interpreted as a union between two stereotypes: blonde and brunette, female and male, business and art, a 1950s woman and a woman from the year 2000. The kiss is also evocative of that exchanged by Madonna and Britney Spears, an event that occurred three years after *Blonde* was published. Aside from its promotional value, this latter kiss meant that the “queen of pop,” as Madonna is often called in the press, had acknowledged Britney as an important, perhaps equally important, singer. The kiss in *Blonde*, meanwhile, symbolizes the union of two sides of Marilyn Monroe: the part of her that is uncompromising, impatient, perfectionist, volatile and a fighter; and the other part of her that had “often failed” to take responsibility for her own life, and “descended into self pity, into helplessness, carelessness, recklessness.”¹¹⁰ For Oates, as for Mailer, Monroe is split between

being a talented, insightful and perfectionist actress, and a passive, somnambulistic self, a shy and stammering “Mouse” from the orphanage.

Moreover, the scene recalls another novel by Oates, *Solstice*,¹¹¹ in which she depicts two women: a blond high school teacher, and a dark-haired, eccentric artist. As the title suggests, their friendship, which is based on tension and power games, has to lead to equilibrium, but it develops in spirals of submission and domination. In this novel, the blond teacher stands for intellect, and for knowledge of the visible and transparent aspects of human beings; while the dark-haired artist represents the subconscious, desire, and the darker side of human nature. In a similar way, throughout the narrative of *Blonde*, Marilyn Monroe rarely achieves a balance between her active and passive sides, between submission and domination, promiscuity and innocence, purity and corruption.

Bearing in mind the cultural climate of the day – the consensus-driven culture of the 1950s, and politicians’ attempts to protect American morals by first censoring paperbacks, then comics – Oates also uses Monroe’s nudity in a positive way, as a symbolic protest against social constraints and as a statement of freedom. When Monroe is asked to express herself during one of her acting classes, she takes her clothes off, as if discarding the layers of social superstition that she is required to wear in order to be Marilyn Monroe. In this scene, she also slips into a deep, almost unconscious sleep, and into the darker side of her true self. Monroe’s desire to be nude may be interpreted as her desire to cast away her mask and expose herself for who she really is. It can also be seen as an attempt to assert artistic freedom at a time when the House Un-American Activities Committee was busying itself with conducting interviews and drawing up blacklists. Her third husband, the Playwright, is not only on a list, but is also “sentenced to one year in prison and fined \$1000”¹¹² for refusing to answer the Committee’s questions. In *Blonde*, the Committee blackmails the “suspect”: the Chair demands a photo session with Marilyn Monroe in exchange for carrying out a less draconian investigation. Last but not least, Monroe is being spied upon by Sharpshooter, who works for “the Agency” and who eventually murders her.

Until the 1970s, Hollywood tried to please the mainstream, producing films that avoided any criticism of American society and that were designed to make its citizens feel good. Both the real and the fictional Marilyn Monroes were caught up in this movement. For example, in *Blonde*, when Monroe looks at Lorelei Lee (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) through the eyes of her imagined father, she sees “foam-rubber Lorelei Lee and her twin-mammalian friend Dorothy mouthing their smart-silly lyrics and moving

their bodies suggestively,”¹¹³ while the audience is admiring the romance, “virginal,” “showgirl” brides and their “radiant” smiles, “sweet” voices, and “surprisingly supple” bodies. The same scene has somber undertones: revelations about Marilyn Monroe’s real life (possibly reflecting the real lives of many Americans), in the form of memories of her abortion and “heavy bleeding,” her codeine, Benzedrine and Nembutal pills, and her “bloodied toenails” after rehearsals. Oates also uses the renovated movie theatre in which the premiere is taking place to make an ironic statement about “post-war prosperity. Out of the rubble of Europe and the demolished cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the booming heartbeat of a new world.” And, “The Blond Actress known as Marilyn Monroe was of this new world … smiling, yet without warmth or sentiment or that complexity of the spirit called ‘depth.’”¹¹⁴

Oates creates a Monroe who, while she objects to portraying reality and her characters as “phony” and “fake,” has to fulfill the directors’ commands that she should “be sexy,” “funny,” “mouth the lines they provided for her and forget about prepping.”¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, Oates insists that Monroe tried to give depth to her blondes, at the cost of many retakes and to the frustration of directors and other actors. For example, Oates’s depiction of how Monroe fought for Roslyn, one of the characters that she played, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the empowerment of women. In the script of *The Misfits*, which is based on Arthur Miller’s short story about men, Roslyn Tabor is an invisible, “what men only see” character. In Oates’s interpretation of the shooting of the film, Monroe wants to make Roslyn conspicuous and to reveal the side of her “that men never see”; she wants to transform her from being a typical 1950s female – “consoling the men & wiping their noses and making them feel loved and admired” – into a woman who is in control, who can “cut the mustangs free.”¹¹⁶

Oates’s portrayal of Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde* is thus based on the continuous struggle between becoming a serious artist and fear of failure, and between the need to be loved and fear of rejection. Oates says that her motivation for writing the novel came from her wish to give Monroe back her humanity, because “her poetic self … has been lost. The spiritual self that we all have.”¹¹⁷ Oates sees this “self” as being present in all the roles that Marilyn Monroe played in her life, and searches for expressions of it. Oates gives each of her roles – as an actress, as Norma Jeane, in her personal life as a daughter and as a wife – a separate name in the narrative. Moreover, when Monroe prepares for her roles, Oates shows her spending a great deal of time thinking about each character, and eventually identifying with them. Several

times, for instance, Oates depicts how in one scene Marilyn Monroe might work through a number of characters, including Norma Jeane, one of her film roles, or a fairy tale Beggar Made or Fair Princess.

Rootlessness

Confusion about Monroe's identity and her name is created at the very beginning of the narrative, when Grandmother Della explains to Norma Jeane why she is called Baker, despite the fact that her mother is called Mortensen:

Because Baker was the one my crazy daughter 'hated less.' ... I [grandmother] lie awake nights grieving for this poor child, all mixed up who she's supposed to be. I should adopt the child and give her my own name that's a good decent uncontaminated name – 'Monroe.'¹¹⁸

In this way, Grandma Della begins the tale of Norma Jeane's insecurity: throughout the narrative, Norma Jeane struggles to determine who she really is, and whom she can trust. According to her mother, Gladys, the name "Norma Jeane" should bring her fame: "Norma is for the great Norma Talmadge, and Jeane is – who else – Harlow."¹¹⁹ At this point, Gladys does not know that Norma Talmadge will die "a junkie's death."¹²⁰

Uncertainty is probably the keyword that underpins Oates's portrait of Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde*. Uncertainty is represented by the City of Sand: easily destructible, lacking foundations, and impalpable. The same uncertainty governs Monroe's family. Norma Jeane is born into a dysfunctional family: she has no father, her mother is psychiatrically ill, and the only stable relative, Grandmother Della, dies when Monroe is only six or seven years old. Thus at this young age, Monroe already has to recreate herself and adapt in order to survive: "*what was required of me was that I remain alive.*"¹²¹ The world around her is Baudrillard's postmodern, simulated world in which the virtual reality of films is substituted for everyday reality. Her own mother is an example of the modern narcissist, for whom the real world is the one on the screen:

At the Studio where Gladys Mortensen [Norma's mother] had been an employee since the age of nineteen there was the world-you-see-with-your-eyes and the world-through-the-camera. The one was nothing, the other was everything. So in time Mother learned to perceive me through the mirror. Even

to smile at me. (Not eye-to-eye! Never.) In the mirror it's like a camera eye, almost you can love.¹²²

In both the mother's and, later, the daughter's world, meaning is created on the screen. The phrase, "For there is no meaning to life apart from the movie story,"¹²³ and variations on this are repeated throughout the book, becoming a leitmotiv of Monroe's life. The young Norma Jeane mostly lives in a fantasy world that features a Dark Prince and a Fair Princess. Although her mother's work at the studio has nothing to do with stardom – she merely works at a film laboratory – her need to belong to the world of stardom is a pervasive one. Living the Dream of the Coast, or at least getting as close as possible to living it, is programmed into her genes. Gladys drives Norma Jeane past the villas owned by movie stars, implies numerous times that her father had been a famous movie star, and takes her to films in order to fuel her desire for stardom. In short, Gladys's intention is to make a movie star out of Norma Jeane, just like in *My Sister, My Love*, Betsey Rampike aims to make a skater and a model out of her daughter, Bliss.

In the episode in which Oates describes Irving G. Thalberg's funeral, Norma Jeane's mother dresses her in a costume borrowed from The Studio, and drags her to the funeral. In similar fashion, Betsey Rampike dresses Bliss in various costumes so as to attract the attention of tabloid photographers. In the funeral scene, Norma Jeane is very genuine: she regards the crowd, the ceremony and her mother through an unbiased six-year-old child's eyes. For her, people are unremarkable and are "of no more interest to one another than a flock of sparrows";¹²⁴ she is uncomfortable milling in the crowd, the interior of her mother's car is untidy and hot, and eventually her dress gets torn and the girl "wet[s] her panties."¹²⁵ Meanwhile her mother, as are most people in the crowd, is convinced that she is stricken with grief: "here and there women were wiping at their eyes. Many onlookers appeared disoriented, as if they'd suffered a great loss without knowing what it was."¹²⁶

Norma Jeane's experiences in this particular episode echo Daniel Boorstin's theory of events and pseudo-events. Boorstin argues that pseudo-events are "neither true nor false in the old familiar senses." When reported, however, the images become "more vivid, more attractive, more impressive and more persuasive."¹²⁷ In this episode, the real event is the funeral of an actor. For Norma Jeane, who never saw the man when he was alive, the event brings feelings of discomfort, anxiety about being left alone by her mother, and a fear of being "trampled."¹²⁸ While for her, this event is real in an old-fashioned way, and she deals with her feelings as they arise, the crowd

responds to something that it imagines. Oates describes the scene in the style of a news report. The onlookers select from the information in front of them in order to confirm their own convictions, just as news correspondents edit films of real events in order to create news clips. The crowd itself creates the domain of pseudo-events: the elevated atmosphere, the people who have come to catch a glimpse of the movie stars and are chanting their names as they appear outside the Wilshire Temple, and the “photographers and autograph seekers”¹²⁹ who break through the barricades. Oates gives the episode religious undertones by using words such as “litany,” and with Oatsian irony, the celebrities are compared with “a stream of golden lava.”¹³⁰ This scene, which occurs at the beginning of the narrative, symbolically marks a borderline between real and fake, between events and pseudo-events, or – to quote Norman Mailer’s words from *Marilyn* – between facts and factoids. Norma Jeane, while remaining disinterested, is now part of the crowd. In future, similar crowds will also gather to see her alter ego, Marilyn Monroe.

In this world of pseudo-realities and pseudo-events, Oates suggests that Monroe’s relationship with her mother brings some sanity into her life – despite the fact that, paradoxically, Monroe’s mother is mentally ill. When visiting Gladys, Norma Jeane can be herself, and she never visits her mother as Marilyn Monroe. She dresses differently from how her “image” would demand, and more in line with Oates’s ideal of a “normality”: “shoes with only a medium heel and a tasteful mauve-gray gabardine suit with a boxy, not tight fitting, jacket.”¹³¹ She talks about her husband, career plans, stability, and her problems:

The Studio only offers me sex films. To be blunt. That’s what they are. ... I want to begin again, from zero. Maybe I’ll move to New York to study acting. Serious acting. ... The only true acting is living. Alive. In the movies they splice you together, hundreds of disjointed scenes. It’s a jigsaw puzzle but you’re not the one to put the pieces together.¹³²

Although Gladys rarely responds to her daughter’s words, and, if she does, is cynical or judgmental, Norma Jeane draws on the stability surrounding Gladys and the peaceful atmosphere of the clinic. The latter provides a surrogate home for Monroe, despite being a clinic. In Oates’s novel, Monroe has few roots. As a child, Norma Jeane moves from one place to another, but at least she has somewhere to live. Oates describes, for example, her mother’s flat, the orphanage, the home of her foster family, the Pirigs, and the home

that she shares with her first husband, Buck. Afterwards, however, she is both rootless and homeless; Oates hardly ever describes a flat or a house where she lives. Even in her last house on Helena drive, Monroe does not have time to settle and unpack her moving crates.

Monroe's mother is the only living person who can link her to her past and her roots. As such, Gladys helps Monroe to survive her life as a phony image, and to hold her fragmented personality together. Throughout the narrative, Oates exploits Monroe's feelings of being an "orphan" and an "abandoned child," which Oates sees as the source of her insecurity and constant fear of failure. Unlike her bohemian friends, Eddy G. and Cass Chaplin, Monroe is not drawn to the freedom that is inherent in an image that lacks both roots and history: "You never knew your father, so you are free. You can invent yourself. And you are doing a terrific job of it – 'Marilyn Monroe' ... Your name is so totally phony."¹³³ On a metaphorical level, this is a statement about the New World, a place in which people can reinvent themselves, and need not shoulder the burden of national or family history. As I have shown in other chapters of this study, Oates has always asserted the importance of memory as a pillar of stability, especially in our modern, fragmented times. For her, a name is not as important as the person behind the name, and the stability and integrity of a person's identity.

Another aspect of Marilyn Monroe's search for fulfillment, stability and a home is her role as a wife, and her wish to have a child. Just as she depicts her struggle between being a serious artist and being a "dumb blonde," Oates also shows Monroe struggling to combine work and motherhood, being both a wife and a working woman. Oates uses Marilyn Monroe, or rather Norma Jeane Baker, to represent the generation of women who, having worked outside the home in factories during the war, were not inclined to retire to the domestic sphere afterwards. In the words of "Brunette," a symbol of cynical and materialistic Hollywood who views being an actress as being a "high class hooker," it is this tension that "killed her":

Monroe wanted to be an artist. She was one of the few I'd ever met who took all that crap seriously. That's what killed her, not the other. She wanted to be acknowledged as a great actress and yet she wanted to be loved like a child and obviously you can't have both.

You have to choose which you want the most.

*Me, I chose neither.*¹³⁴

Norma Jeane at the age of 16 marries Bucky Glazer, an employee at an undertaker's business, and both he and his parents expect her to become an exemplary housewife. She tries to meet these expectations by accepting her situation – teenage, high school drop-out, traditional wife – as her role. The marriage had been arranged for her, as her foster mother Elsie Pirig was anxious to marry her off before Norma Jeane could seduce her husband or fall pregnant. Norma Jeane persuades herself she can find fulfillment in this role: “in Mrs. Glazer’s kitchen, she’d been happy.... [she] had married Bucky to acquire both a husband and a mother.”¹³⁵ Yet, when new possibilities and “roles” arise, she is the one to initiate divorce proceedings.

Monroe’s second marriage is very different: it is a union between two American stars, neither of whom wants to give up their fame. Ex-Athlete intends to protect Monroe from “those jackals,” keeping the sexy Marilyn Monroe for himself and providing his parents with a daughter-in-law. Oates imagines a symbolic scene: on the night they agreed to marry, Ex-Athlete sleeps in bed while the Blond Actress stands naked at the window, exposing herself to “the die-hard ragtag band of fans”; “in this way, the long night was endured.”¹³⁶ Monroe’s narcissistic craving for admiration trumps her desire to sleep peacefully with her new husband. The Blond Actress could hardly find a role for herself in such circumstances:

In this household amid her husband’s big noisy family she wasn’t the Blond Actress and certainly she wasn’t Marilyn Monroe, for no one could be ‘Marilyn’ without a camera to record her. She wasn’t Norma Jeane either. Only just Ex-Athlete’s wife.¹³⁷

Monroe’s third marriage to the Playwright, as Oates imagines it, is a marriage of two artists, two equals. The Playwright analyses her character, and tries to understand her as both an actress and as his wife. As such, he often feels that he is “her nurse” and “her only friend.”¹³⁸ We see the Blond Actress through his eyes, his inability to cope with the extremities of her emotions, drug and alcohol abuse, and her inconsistent behavior and delusions. In this marriage, she is not supposed to be a housewife, but she is expected to be a rational and responsible individual: “he reasoned with the Blonde Actress as no other man had. Yes, he’d held her and comforted her; yes, he’d babied her as other men had done; but he also talked frankly with her.”¹³⁹ He is a lover, a father, a nurse, and even her scriptwriter, participating in the shooting of films in England and in Nevada.

Marilyn Monroe welcomes her pregnancy during this marriage, and indulges in happy dreams of maternal fulfillment. The atmosphere of the couple's stay on the coast shifts between light and dark moments, however: between enjoyment of the simple life, gardening and resting, and the slowly developing forces of darkness. Oates introduces the image of a cellar: a dark place from which Norma can discern noises, "scuffling sounds," "a sound of agitation," a "baby's single scream,"¹⁴⁰ which the Playwright inspects and finds nothing. The "cellar" stands for Norma's subconscious, the darker side of her character that compels her to act irrationally. In the next scene, Oates describes Norma "at the bottom of the cellar steps, moaning and writhing."¹⁴¹ It is not clear whether she fell by accident, or jumped. Oates suggests that during the summer at Captains House, she had become bored in the absence of film sets, affairs, and the glare of the cameras. Her wish to have a baby was overpowered by her desire to be filmed and to be famous. Marilyn Monroe's role as a mother or wife cannot be sustained longer than the shooting of a film; it is just another role.

In these ways, the people around Norma Jeane create her reality: as a child, this role is performed by her mentally-ill mother; and when she becomes the adult Marilyn Monroe, the role is assumed by producers, directors, husbands, her bohemian friends and the studio atmosphere. As a young girl and as a woman, Norma Jeane still has some connection with reality. The more famous she becomes, however, the more fragmented and imagined her life becomes. The only husband who Oates identifies by name is Buck Glazer; the other two are referred to by the generic terms of Ex-athlete and Playwright. The first marriage takes place in "the real world" populated by ordinary people, when Marilyn Monroe is Norma Jeane. The other marriages and relationships are unions between the Blonde Actress and men who seek her for her fame and her image. Her other companions have mythical names or nicknames: President, Sharpshooter, Carlo, Porky Pig, and V. Monroe herself is either a character from her films – Rose, or The Girl Upstairs – or an imaginary Fair Princess, Blonde Actress or Miss Golden Dreams. She floats through life, her relationships are short, and she constantly moves from one apartment to another. The celebrity world in which she lives is simulated and imagined; it is as if the world of glossy magazines, posters, and pinups, had been reflected in mirrors and on screen: "I'd set up a mirror to watch myself on the toilet, even. Anything I did in the mirror, I could hear waves and waves of applause,"¹⁴² says Monroe's friend Cass Chaplin. Monroe constantly consults her "Magic Friend in the mirror."

Oates's depiction of popular, celebrity culture suggests her concern at its instability and fluidity. Oates worries about the impact of this culture on society at large, and on groups of ordinary people – as in *My Sister, My Love* – who idealize the lives of the rich and famous. In the latter narrative, the celebrity world is peddled in tabloids and on television. Betsey Rampike does not have time to visit or call her son Skyler, so he learns about the most important events in their family through television talk shows. His school is equipped to support such communication: “An empty lounge, and the TV turned on high. Through Hodge Hill there were TV sets and during the day the TV sets were usually on and if you approached a room you couldn’t tell if TV voices or ‘real’ voices were chattering away inside.”¹⁴³ Skyler experiences television not only as something he watches, but also as something that watches him; rather than being in control, he feels controlled by it. Seeing his mother on a television show inspires deep emotions in him:

Skyler sat paralyzed a few inches in front of the TV screen, that exuded an ominous heat. He’d begun scratching at his face and scalp, his nails drawing blood. How his skin itched! How he’d like to have clawed his skin off! In his ears was a roaring as of a sanitation truck ingesting trash into his belly.¹⁴⁴

In Oates’s narrative, the media have the power to keep dead people alive – with the footage of Skyler’s dead sister being “played, played and replayed on any TV, by chance you might discover it at any time, day and night, on any TV channel” – and to control the lives of the living. As a result of being exposed to this television show, Skyler ends up seeing a psychiatrist. Indeed, Oates has voiced her regret about the fact that a shift from written to visual culture is taking place, that television and the world of images are starting to replace human contact, and that quality newspapers are beginning to resemble tabloids:

‘I was noticing how we’ve developed into a kind of tabloid culture where even the *New York Times* is reporting on things that, in the past, might have been left to the tabloids,’ she explains. ‘The Monica Lewinsky case is the most notorious, where something of an essentially trivial and private nature is elevated to prominent attention. ... My focus was always on what it would be like to dwell in tabloid hell, to have a name that,

when you introduced yourself to anybody anywhere, the name would precede you with this sort of aura of scandal.”¹⁴⁵

To Oates, living in this “tabloid hell” is destructive and destabilizing. As a result, the Rampikes cease to exist as a family. The parents divorce, and Skyler loses touch with both of them. Skyler eventually finds refuge in The Ark, “the barn-sized house/rectory in which Pastor Bob Fluchaus lived with an ever-shifting household of assistants, church-volunteers, ‘family.’”¹⁴⁶ Similarly, in *Blonde*, towns and houses seldom provide permanent places to stay: Marilyn Monroe does not even manage to unpack before she moves again. In *Blonde*, Oates uses the metaphor of the “City of Sand” – Hollywood – to expose the instability and rootlessness that lies at the heart of celebrity culture. The City also symbolizes the risk and insecurity inherent in a profession that is often dependent on media hype and contradictory accounts in tabloids. In a broader sense, the “City of Sand” might also be seen as a metaphor for contemporary American culture in its fragmentation and fusion of reality and fantasy, and of low and high culture, the instability of its relationships, and the way it undermines both history and heritage. Chris Rojek, in his writings on postmodern leisure, uses such terms as “disembedding,” “hyperreality,” “speed,” “risk,” and “necro-fever.” He argues that far from being rooted in a “geographical locale,” modern society imbues a sense of belonging to a “universal cultural space.” Modern society accepts the artificiality of life, contingencies that no one can control, and assumes that while “daily relationships” are unreal, those on screen “attain a magnetic hold on consciousness.”¹⁴⁷

Myth and Entertainment

At the turn of the century, it has become fashionable for visibly pregnant actresses to receive Academy Awards or to pose in front of the cameras at the Cannes Film Festival. In *Blonde*, the scripts are determined by traditional mythologies that would never allow a pregnant princess on stage. Marilyn Monroe has to transform herself into an archetypal character from the world of fairy tales. Norma Jeane, and later Marilyn Monroe, identifies herself with the Fair Princess, who is predestined to love the Dark Prince. Different stages of life and different movie scenes require her to embody a new archetype, or to encounter another character: indeed, the novel is populated by Cinderella, the Beggar Maid, the Magic Friend in the Mirror, Rumpelstiltskin, the Frog Chauffeur, and Porky Pig, while the action takes place in the City of Sand or the Kingdom of Perpetual Damp. “Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre on Holly-

wood Boulevard”¹⁴⁸ turns into a semi-mythical place where dreams come true; this is where Marilyn Monroe holds her premieres, and where crowds gather to admire her.

Oates’s view is clearly that these mythical characters belong to an irrational, fantasy world, rather than the modern world. What does Oates mean by including these characters in *Blonde*? In her essay, “In Olden Times When Wishing Was Having: Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales,” Oates argues that the world of fairy tales is cruel, patriarchal and limiting. Although fairy tales have communal origins and were created by ordinary people, aristocratic births are to be valued above common parentage, “individual merit is rarely celebrated,” “your fate is deserved because it happens to you,” and to “express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy-tale ‘goddess.’”¹⁴⁹ This, in turn, reminds us of a number of passages in *Blonde*: Norma Jeane longs to be a Fair Princess, so to speak, and to belong to the aristocracy. She is terrified of failing and of having to return to the lower classes. Her life is regulated by Hollywood “strictures” and scripts that have been written by men, and celebrity and fame is achieved through an image that was created by the studios, rather than the person behind it. These elements from an “ahistoric, and timeless, politically static” world, with “its abbreviated *dramatis personae* a perennial cast of kings queens, princes, and princesses,”¹⁵⁰ expose our limitations and infantilism, and help us to deconstruct the myths that we have chosen to believe in. The western world may have lost its link with tradition, but Oates is suggesting that we have to reconsider this tradition: not all traditions are of equal value.

In the case of fame, however, Oates views the traditional notion of stardom as being more attractive than the contemporary one. Norma Jeane says, “Stars have substance, originally. ‘Light’ can’t be generated out of nothing. ...And that’s true for human ‘stars’ too. They must be something, not just nothing. There must be substance to them.”¹⁵¹ The Playwright’s perspective on celebrity worship must be close to Oates’s own view:

The Playwright recalled having seen in one of the magazines an astonishing photo, taken from the roof of a building, of a mob scene in Tokyo, thousands of ‘fans’ crowding a public square in the hope of catching sight of the Blond Actress. He would not have supposed the Japanese knew much of ‘Marilyn Monroe’ or would have cared. Was this some new lurid development in the history of mankind? Public hysteria in the pres-

ence of someone known to be famous? Marx had famously denounced religion as the opiate of the people; except the Church of Fame carried with it not even the huckster's promise of salvation, heaven. Its pantheon of saints was a hall of distorting mirrors.¹⁵²

In this passage, Oates raises questions about the status of celebrities, our perceptions of them, and the meaning we attach to them. She is asserting that rather than being meaningful in some way, our preoccupation with celebrity is close to being infantile "public hysteria." As we have seen, from her analysis of Monroe's image, celebrities do not offer their fans anything "real" when making such appearances, but rather project a fake image that has been created for marketing purposes. Both Boorstin and Rojek confirm Oates's claim that two-dimensional images have become more important to us than real people: "An illusion ... is an image that we have mistaken for reality."¹⁵³ The world presented in magazines and on screen is much more "vivid" and attractive than the real world; icons from the virtual world are more significant than academics and heroes. Like mythical figures, however, these two-dimensional figures from the virtual world have no depth.

Oates's novel, *Broke Heart Blues* (1999), illustrates how such a mythical figure can be born out of boredom. In this narrative, Oates locates the public's obsession with the cult of the famous in the hope of assuaging the emptiness of existence. If we lack a hero to adore, we create one. Oates devises the so-called "Circle": a group of affluent, snobbish teenagers. In the first part of the novel, this group constructs a myth of a lonely hero and savior, a myth that is then deconstructed in Parts II and III. If a public relations machine is responsible for creating the image of a star such as Marilyn Monroe, in *Broke Heart Blues*, it is the "audience" themselves who create and worship an image. In *Blonde*, Marilyn Monroe is aware of her image and of its impact; it is part of her, and she plays this role consistently in her public appearances and films. John Reddy Heart, the hero of *Broke Heart Blues*, has no comprehension of his mythical status, only a feeling that "they'd seemed to like him, to see some elusive promise in him."¹⁵⁴

The Circle – a group of conformist, articulate and wealthy middle-class high school students, whose biggest act of rebellion is "swigging beer"¹⁵⁵ – becomes preoccupied with a lower-class student who has been accused of murder, John Reddy Heart. Lacking adventure in their lives, ignorant of hardship, and searching for emotional attachment and a sense of identity, the Circle teenagers imagine John Reddy Heart to be their hero. They project

their romantic dreams onto him, developing an obsession for him and elevating his status to mythical proportions. The myth of John Reddy Heart is created out of fascination with his freedom, his early maturity, his stoicism, and the real events in his life – murder, flight from the police and recapture, imprisonment, and life in a dysfunctional family.

Part I deals with the creation of the mythical cult. The story is told from the point of view of members of the Circle, who appear to know very little about the Heart family, their past and present, but who are able to interpret and create fables. In the imagination of the Circle, a simple act of kindness becomes miraculous. John Reddy Heart pushes a disabled girl's wheelchair, comforting her that she is not excluded from the group by saying, "Maybe Jesus was a leper too."¹⁵⁶ This phrase becomes "a revelation" to the girl. "Like Jesus was speaking to me,"¹⁵⁷ she later claims to her friends. The phrase assumes a life of its own; it is recorded "in school notebooks, scrawled inside lockers, and in flaming lipstick in the toilet stalls of girls' restrooms not only at school but throughout the village..."¹⁵⁸ Eventually, it becomes the title for the local reverend's most "stirring and inspirational sermons."¹⁵⁹ Little by little, the students collect "artifacts," such as a Coca Cola can from which John Reddy has drunk, snippets of conversations, interpret bruises on John's body and hearsay about fights and car accidents, his performance at basketball, and looks. They fill gaps in their knowledge with the aid of imagination and wishful thinking, and construct a myth of someone they can idealize.

The students are driven to value an imaginary world more than the real one out of a longing for intimacy, a sense of void in their inner world, and their lack of relationships. The girls long for love and emotional involvement, to the extent that being offered a lift in a car in the pouring rain leads to an imagined love affair. Erie County Detention Centre, in which John Reddy Heart has been incarcerated pending trial, becomes a place of pilgrimage. Boys long for role models, as their fathers are rarely at home ("they have to work 'damned hard' ... to maintain our Willowsville homes and 'lifestyle'"¹⁶⁰). One of the boys, Ritchie Eickhorn confesses that after his father "dropped dead at the age of forty of coronary thrombosis while negotiating a contract for a steel company," he started to get to know him, since now "he's settled down" and "he's in one place."¹⁶¹ Another boy, Bo Bozer, does not perceive any difference between life before his parents' separation and after, since his father "was gone before, he's gone now."¹⁶² Ken Fisher goes hunting with his father because "it's this father-son thing," even though both of them hate hunting. After a long walk through the snow, Ken realizes that

“Dad hopes I’ll shoot him in the back. To put him out of his misery.”¹⁶³ While John Reddy Heart, in their opinion, is not afraid of death, he is their “Prince of Pride”,¹⁶⁴ unlike their fathers, they feel that he is there where they can see him, and that he is real. The boys project their desires and feelings onto John Reddy Heart, and believe that he is the way they see him.

The adults are also affected by the Hearts, who undermine the neighborhood’s standards of good taste when redoing the house, or repairing their car on the street. The Hearts’s arrival in Willowsville forces its inhabitants to confront another way of life, other possibilities, and their own flaws. Owing to John Reddy Heart, Willowsville’s inhabitants awaken from their myth of the good life that is grounded in suburban values, traditional male and female roles, consumption, and the desire to be happy. By (it is assumed) murdering one of his mother’s lovers, Mr. Riggs, John Reddy Heart releases emotions, causes a commotion, and forces the inhabitants to face the truth. At first, this double moral remains hidden: while in private, the inhabitants say of the murder, “At last somebody got the guts to do it”; “in public, though, everybody said *What a shock, what a shame, what a tragedy.*”¹⁶⁵ Later, at the trial, Mr. Riggs’s widow discloses the truth about her late husband:

Yes, my husband was a brute! It was my secret, and I am sick of secrets! Having to pretend – it’s exhausting, half the women of Willowsville are exhausted, we keep up the effort for years for decades, then one day, we stop.¹⁶⁶

What gives rise to the John Reddy Heart cult is not only Mr. Riggs’s murder and John’s flight from the police, his time in custody and the trial, but also the media’s coverage of the events. The “cult of John” has the elements of any celebrity cult: his name is featured in newspaper headlines, his “face reproduced in the media daily for weeks,” “even in English and European papers”; “The Ballad of John Reddy Heart,” by the rock band “Made in USA” reaches number one in the charts; and a “docudrama” is produced by CBS,¹⁶⁷ along with a “luridly glamorous made-for-TV film *The Loves of the White Dahlia.*”¹⁶⁸ Reporters interview cleaning ladies, “Buffalo celebrities like Mayor Dorsey,” high school teachers, and the “good looking girls of the Circle.” The articles are published in “Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report,” “the New York Times and the Wall street Journal.”¹⁶⁹ Last but not least, to the students of the Circle, John Reddy Heart becomes an almost religious figure, an archetype of Jesus Christ the Savior. The police catch him on Mount Nazarene, and his followers “fasted” and “prayed,” and were

happiest on their “knees praying for John Reddy like good Christian girls were.”¹⁷⁰ In a similar way, in *Blonde*, when Marilyn Monroe visits American troops in Korea, one of the soldiers “falls in the stampede and is trampled,” while some others break bones. Mass hysteria is comparable with “feeding time in the zoo, apes and monkeys”¹⁷¹ as the novel’s narrator observes.

The deconstruction of the myth occurs in Part II, when Oates reveals the facts. In this section of the novel, John Reddy Heart, who now calls himself John Heart, tells his side of the story. He is a mature adult engaged in one of the least romantic of professions: a general handyman and carpenter with a pick-up truck; a MR FIX-IT. We learn that he has hardly any contact with his family, including his mother, and that he does not have a family himself, and lives in a trailer. Using flashbacks, Oates further demythologizes his past: instead of feeling adored, like a star, John Reddy had been preoccupied with his family, acting the role of the father who had long been dead, and protecting his mother and siblings. Oates depicts the Hearts as a dysfunctional, “white trash” family: the alcoholic grandfather has a criminal record; the mother is unable to take care of the children; the traumatized younger children eventually end up in foster care. Despite the fact that many years have passed, John is still wrestling with the question of why he took the gun and ran off – if not to do his duty, then to keep the family together – although the family scattered immediately after the trial. In a sense, then, his act of protection was useless. As far as the Circle is concerned, John Heart feels that he “passed among inhabitants like a ghost.”¹⁷² His life then was more about survival than a search for heroic deeds or romantic adventures. For Oates, like for Roland Barthes,¹⁷³ it is critical to separate fantasy from facts, to disclose facts, and to dispel illusions.

The counterforce for delusion and the voice of reason in the novel is that of the history teacher, Mr. Feldman. His sane and rational point of view makes him unpopular, but may also reflect Oates’s own views:

There is an undeclared war between the ninety-nine percent of human beings who persist in believing in fairy tales and ‘myths’ and the valiant one percent who use their intellects, reason, analyze, come to independent conclusions. ... The human instinct to create myths seems to be as deeply rooted in our species as the instinct to bond, to mate, to reproduce, it just is ... dangerous in so technically advanced a civilization, it’s a primitive remnant that doesn’t belong in such civilization.¹⁷⁴

In Part III, during their 30th reunion, the Circle realize that they had adored an image, not a genuine person. However, even though they realize their delusions, they still feel comfortable with the myth, for it is a part of their past that unites them and remains part of their identity. At the reunion party, it is obligatory to listen to their “all-time favorite” song, “The Ballad of John Reddy Heart,”¹⁷⁵ and to retell the events surrounding the murder of Mr. Riggs. After this, everyone participates in roasting and eating a pig, endless drinking, reckless dancing, and accidents occur. Sexual suggestions are made, high school sweethearts get back together, and so forth – events that reveal instinctive behavior that is more ritualistic than civilized. At their 30th reunion, the Circle, now consisting of highly-educated professionals and intellectuals, casts etiquette aside and plunges into something more primitive, engaging in regressive teenage rites. The leitmotiv for the most hysterical moment – the collapse of the redwood deck, caused by an admiring stampede celebrating the reunion of two high school lovers – is a line from a song: “Hunger Hunger! I gotta hunger! Hunger ain’t never gonna be ful-FILLED!”¹⁷⁶ Oates is alluding both to physical hunger (although they have just eaten), and to the spiritual and emotional hunger that drove the creation of the John Reddy Heart myth 30 years ago, and which still exists for them now.

Roland Barthes writes in *Mythologies* that “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor confession: it is an inflection.”¹⁷⁷ In *Broke Heart Blues*, by distorting reality, myth serves to conceal and, later on, to support the infantilism and immaturity of the Circle. This distortion helps the Circle to hide from themselves, to stay “ignorant and spoiled children of the doomed bourgeoisie”¹⁷⁸ as Evangeline Fesnacht, one of the Circle girls, puts it. The same idea is expressed by the history teacher: “the yearning for mythic origins must be exposed as infantile, ‘nostalgia’ for what never was, ludicrously out of place in a civilization founded upon scientific progress, linear time, ceaseless change – history.”¹⁷⁹ In the end, Katie may discard the Coca Cola can that she had kept for all those years as a relic of her idol; but will she, along with the others, be able to break free of the constraints that have been imposed by the self-created myth? For when the myth is gone, nothing will replace it. Shelby Connor, another Circle girl, asks her therapist: “if I outgrow John Reddy Heart, what will I have left?”¹⁸⁰ Thus, although we can comprehend how myth obscures reality and creates nostalgia for things that never happened, we still have a need for myth – even though such a need may become pathological. Indeed, McCutcheon *et al.* claim that obsessions with celebrities are a “normal part of identity develop-

ment in childhood and adolescence.”¹⁸¹ In adulthood, however, they may lead to a “psychologically abnormal state,” in which the worshipper starts to neglect his or her everyday duties. The fake or distorted reality becomes a substitute for the real one.

The myth in *Broke Heart Blues* also has a religious aspect. As suggested earlier, Oates makes biblical and religious allusions to the life of Jesus Christ, thus implying that an obsession with someone who is either famous or imagined to be famous approaches a form of unconditional religious belief. As Ellis Cashmore suggests, a number of scholars researching consumer engagement with celebrities have argued that there are historical and religious elements to their obsession. The argument goes that the disappearance of religious experience in a secular age has left a void, which people now fill with new mythological creatures: celebrities who are also associated with good and evil forces. Historically, there have always been people who consider themselves to be above the crowd. In a “Post-God” era, however, celebrities have become “touchables”¹⁸² – cameras catch them doing the most ordinary, if not obscene, things. As with religion, celebrities can become role models and influence the actions and morals of others.

Oates acknowledges the existence of this gap, but she does not necessarily think that it has been created by secularization. Rather, she believes that we have become alienated from our natural way of life, and from our authentic selves. In her novels, we see that a fake image, often an image that has been created in order to enrich the media or business corporations, is able to lure the crowds – just like the Miss Golden Dreams picture: “*I'm Miss Golden Dreams. How'd like to kiss me? All over? Here I am, waiting. Already I've been loved by hundreds of thousands of men. And my reign is just beginning.*”¹⁸³ We fail to question what we see, and we accept images despite knowing that they are fakes. In doing so, we are entertained; the “opiate” dulls the senses, and keeps us happy. According to Neil Postman, today we want ever more entertainment, even in areas that traditionally have not been intended as entertainment:

... the producers of American culture will increasingly turn our history, politics, religion, commerce, and education into forms of entertainment, and that we will become as a result a trivial people, incapable of coping with complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, perhaps even reality.¹⁸⁴

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Postman claims that Aldous Huxley was right in saying that “the truth would be concealed from us … in a sea of irrelevance,”¹⁸⁵ and not by some “external oppression,” as Orwell suggested. Huxley held that we would be controlled, not through inflicting pain, but by “inflicting pleasure,”¹⁸⁶ and that eventually, we would become a trivial culture.¹⁸⁷ Postman believes that it is not technology that is to blame for the overflow of imagery and theatrics in the media, “but our pursuit of pleasure, our desire to be entertained.”¹⁸⁸ His fear is that by focusing on amusement and chasing popular whims, we ignore important societal and global issues:

When a culture becomes overloaded with pictures; when logic and rhetoric lose their binding authority; when historical truth becomes irrelevant; when the spoken or written word is distrusted or makes demands on our attention that we are incapable of giving; when our politics, history, education, religion, public information, and commerce are expressed largely in visual imagery rather than words, then a culture is in serious jeopardy.¹⁸⁹

In *Broke Heart Blues*, Oates exposes our desire to adore film stars and celebrities. In *My Sister, My Love*, she satirizes our wish to live in a virtual world and imitate celebrities, while ignoring immediate reality. In *Blonde*, Oates protests against our “only entertainment” culture, rejecting the common portrayal of Marilyn Monroe as a mere playmate, and exposing the destruction of an individual on the way to a stardom. In these three novels, she confronts us with the uncomfortable fact that we choose to believe in images, whether they are Marilyn Monroe’s image or the myth of John Reddy, for our own entertainment and pleasure. In doing so, we ignore Boorstin’s timely warning that such images are fakes, and that they do not match the self-perception of the individuals behind them.

Chapter 5

The Artist as Antagonist: Transgressions of Genre and the Use of Parody

In her essay, “The Romance of Art: Four Brief Pieces,” Joyce Carol Oates writes that “the challenge for an artist is to fulfill his or her destiny as the perpetual antagonist: the one who questions what others believe they believe; the one who questions even the role of art and artists.”¹ Oates is asserting that the artist not only rebels against the conventions of the day, but that he or she also has a duty to explore, challenge, review and revise them. This is certainly the approach that Oates has consistently taken in her own writing. For Oates, “rewriting” has also taken the form of revising and rewriting the work of her predecessors. For instance, she has rewritten two versions of “The Turn of the Screw” by Henry James;² “The Dead” by James Joyce;³ “The lady with the Pet Dog”⁴ by Anton Chekhov; “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka, and other works. She also parodies and expands the limits of literary genres, and pushes ethical and aesthetical boundaries. In doing so, she focuses unrelentingly upon issues affecting American society. In “Art and Ethics? – The (F)Utility of Art,” Oates portrays the artist as both a perpetual antagonist and as somebody who is “supremely self-determined; the artist as deeply bonded to his or her world, and in a meaningful relationship with a community – this is the artist’s ethics, and the artist’s aesthetics.”⁵

Oates’s insistence on bonding herself to her surroundings and on maintaining a “meaningful relationship” with her community places her among those writers for whom representation and historicity are essential, regardless of their method of storytelling. Previous chapters of this study were concerned with Oates’s representation of contemporary America. In this chapter, I examine how Oates responds to postmodernity, and how she defines the role of a writer in a period when culture is “just another industry,” as Theodor Adorno⁶ has suggested. I will argue that Oates explores and challenges the limitations of different genres through parody, while at the same time remaining rooted in contemporary cultural contexts. While her parodies often pay homage to past masters of the genre, satirical elements allow her to retain a link with reality – an approach that echoes Linda Hutcheon’s theory of parody.

Hutcheon affirms that 20th-century parody “is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text.”⁷ It is a “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity...”⁸ The standard definition of parody to be found in most dictionaries does not reflect these 20th-century “aesthetic manifestations,”⁹ and instead focuses on how the parodied text is mocked.¹⁰ Hutcheon shows that “the parodied text today is often not at all under attack. It is often respected and used as a model...”¹¹ In chapter two of this study, I elaborated on Oates’s parody of *Ulysses*, in which Oates holds James Joyce’s work at a respectable distance and uses it as a standard, while scrutinizing contemporary business practices and relationships between men and women, and parents and children. For Oates, as well as for Hutcheon, the relationship between literature and art and the real world is an essential one, and satire offers the most important means of parodying society and its ideologies. Hutcheon believes that parody “permits the critical distance that can engender contact with the ‘world’ ... through satire”¹² and “a parodic satire and satiric parody enable parody... to be worldly”¹³ or ideological.

Hutcheon’s understanding of parody contrasts with that of Fredric Jameson, who holds that in the postmodern period, “parody finds itself without a vocation.” In his view, “pastiche slowly comes to take its [parody’s] place,” because the “personal style” or individuality of art has vanished. According to his definition, pastiche is a “blank parody” that is devoid of historicity and satire; it is “a statue with blind eyeballs.”¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon admits that “parody” is not a popular term among commentators on postmodernism, but for a different reason from that identified by Jameson; namely, “it is still tainted with eighteenth-century notions of wit and ridicule.”¹⁵ Given that Oates’s works are historically grounded, and she certainly has her own individual style, I argue that her parodies are meaningful and that she often seeks to participate in societal discourses through her satiric parodies.

As the recent novels of Joyce Carol Oates form the main focus of this thesis, in this chapter I will refrain from discussing Oates’s short fiction, plays or poetry, unless these works are particularly relevant to the analysis of the novels. First, I look at how Oates expands the limits of her fiction by incorporating the conventions of popular genre fiction.¹⁶ For instance, she transgresses both romance and detective genres, employs melodrama, and satirizes late-19th- and 20th-century American social mores. Furthermore, over the last two decades Oates has published a number of thrillers and suspense novels under pseudonyms, a common practice among popular genre writers. To illustrate the contrast between Oates’s generic parodies and her works of

crime fiction, I discuss the quintet of novels that she wrote in the 1980s. It is possible that Oates's turn towards genre fiction helped her to reach a wider audience, and bring popular genres closer to literary fiction. It may also have served as a form of escapism from more demanding projects, and as a means of investigating genre fiction. In the 1990s, Oates also developed her critique of popular culture. Next, I look at how Oates deals with the tension between fact and fiction and how she pushes ethical and aesthetical boundaries to extremes, for instance in her spoof on postmodernism that is based on her own suburban satire, *Expensive People*.

If during the modern period, popular culture and genre fiction were considered to belong to the sphere of entertainment – simplistic and beyond the scope of academic interest – in the postmodern era, popular culture has assumed quite a different status. Today, popular culture is a respected field of academic study. Indeed, Fredric Jameson has argued that the “fundamental feature of all the postmodernisms” is “effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture.”¹⁷

Although processes of cultural democratization have blurred the demarcation lines between popular and serious fiction, along with those between mass and elite culture, these lines nonetheless remain visible. Ken Gelder argues that even today, genre fiction – detective stories, romances, westerns, social melodramas, and fantasy – is considered to be mass-produced for entertainment purposes, and thus the “opposite of Literature”¹⁸ (Gelder uses a capital “L”). Even though readers “move” from one kind of fiction to another, “Literature and popular fiction will not necessarily be read or ‘processed’ in the same way.”¹⁹ Gelder considers two important features of genre fiction to be bulk and serialization. Its audience consists of consumers rather than readers, who mainly seek escapism and amusement. The writers produce their work according to the requirements of a specific genre, avoid complicated story lines, and seek “to reach a large number of readers.”²⁰ The definition of popular fiction in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* also emphasizes these commercial aspects:

Popular fiction is, essentially, a fast-selling, high-volume product that, typically, leaves little or no residue (who now reads the book ‘everyone’ was reading in 1933, *Anthony Adverse*) [by Hervey Allen]. Rate of sale and replaceability (this year’s bestsellers are rarely last year’s) are two key criteria.²¹

The romance writer, Jayne Ann Krentz, believes that serious literary fiction tends to focus on an intimate examination of characters who are victims of their own flaws, whereas genre fiction explores and dissects – in often intimate and excruciatingly painful detail – neuroses, psychoses, obsessions, depressions, sexual dysfunction and other often-destructive aspects of the human condition.²²

Harold Bloom's disappointed reaction to the National Book Foundation's decision to honor Stephen King with a Distinguished Achievement Award offers a good illustration of the tendency to keep popular fiction and serious literature apart. Bloom insisted that, "by awarding it to King they recognize nothing but the commercial value of his books, which sell in millions but do little more for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat."²³ In his opinion, such an award would be better bestowed on Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, writers who "deserve our praise." Gelder concludes that, "writers of popular fiction are indeed rarely admitted into the realms that Literature claims for itself – and vice versa. When they are admitted, then the differences between the logics and practices of these two fields often become strikingly apparent."²⁴

Nevertheless, genre fiction as an object of academic study has been steadily gaining in status and attracting respect. Kay Mussell, commenting on romantic fiction, claims that "scholars no longer automatically assume that romances are beneath consideration."²⁵ Janice Radway, meanwhile, insists that romances can engage their readers in different ways, and are not only read for entertainment purposes. For instance, romantic fiction may compensate for readers' unfulfilled needs; it may motivate readers to take part in activities that they would not otherwise have tried; and it may help to create a symbolic female community for women who do not have a job. The very act of reading may serve as an act of independence, and as a means of creating one's own space and time. Romantic fiction, however, "leaves unchallenged the very system of social relations whose faults and imperfections gave rise to the romance and which the romance is trying to perfect."²⁶

The gothic mode of writing, which is prevalent in both romance and crime fiction, has been recognized as a particularly American mode of literature.²⁷ It has been determined by the country's geographical, social and political realities: religious intensities, frontier immensities, isolation and violence, and perhaps above all, the shadows cast by slavery and racism.²⁸ The detective, mystery, thriller and romance genres still prevail in contemporary American fiction, and feature among Joyce Carol Oates's favorite modes of writing. Oates believes that genre "hardly demeans genius but provides its

very channel of expression.”²⁹ Her view is in marked contrast to that of Henry James, who “spoke with unusual disdain” of his ghost story, “The Turn of the Screw.”³⁰

Oates’s so-called “gothic quintet” constitutes an ambitious engagement with parody, history and the reworking of genre fiction. Each of these five novels addresses a different fictional genre: the family saga (*Bellefleur*, 1980); romance (*A Bloodsmoor Romance*, 1982); the detective story (*Mysteries of Winterthurn*, 1984); family saga and memoir (*My Heart Laid Bare*, 1998); and the gothic horror novel (*Crosswicks Horror*, not yet published). Oates indicates that she wanted these novels to function as “chapters or units in an immense design: America as viewed through the prismatic lens of its most popular genres.”³¹ She describes her motivation for plunging into genre fiction as follows:

Why ‘genre,’ one might ask? Does a serious writer dare concern herself with ‘genre’? ... But the formal discipline of ‘genre’ – that it forces us inevitably to a radical re-visioning of the craft of fiction – was the reason I found the project so intriguing. To choose idiosyncratic but not distracting ‘narrators’ to recite the histories; to organize the voluminous materials in patterns alien to my customary way of thinking and writing; to ‘see’ the world in terms of heredity and family destiny and the vicissitudes of Time (for all five novels are secretly fables of the American family); to explore historically authentic crimes against women, children, and the poor; to create, and to identify with, heroes and heroines whose existence would be problematic in the clinical, unkind, and one might almost say, fluorescent-lit atmosphere of present-day fiction – these factors proved irresistible.³²

Contrary to the common assumption that genre fiction is written solely for escapist purposes, Oates demonstrates that within the “discipline of the genre,” philosophical and, in particular, social issues may become the object of exploration, in addition to the genre itself. Although Oates had only counted on a small academic readership for her gothic quintet, *Bellefleur* became her first bestseller. Her experiment confirms Fredric Jameson’s opinion that “the survival of genre in emergent mass culture” is “to be understood as the historical reappropriation and displacement of older structures in the service of the qualitatively very different situation of repetition.”³³

When blended with highbrow literature, something that had been considered strictly formulaic and popular now gained quite a different reputation.

Romance and Parody

Two novels in Oates's oeuvre include the word "romance" in their titles: *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and *Middle Age: A Romance*. This does not mean that Oates avoids romance in her other works; on the contrary, her subplots make extensive use of it. These two narratives shed particular light on her attitudes towards the romance genre, however. In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Oates subverts 19th-century romance conventions by freeing her female protagonists from paternal power, inducing confusion in the conservative narrator, exposing female sexuality and introducing gender shifts, and by allowing her female characters to have careers. In *Middle Age*, meanwhile, she sabotages the traditional course of romantic love stories by inverting gender roles and our expectations of romantic-heroic characters. The ironic and sarcastic manner in which Oates portrays love scenes, social gatherings and celebrations in this narrative challenges the very principles of romantic fiction.

The romance genre has changed over time; in its late-20th century incarnation, the genre has kept pace with social movements, and romances now engage more readily with reality than their predecessors. According to Cawelti, the key feature of a romance is a plot that is organized around the "development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman."³⁴ Whether this relationship ends in happy marriage or in one of the character's deaths, its most important aspect is the suggestion that the love relationship "is of lasting and permanent impact."³⁵ The romance writer and commentator Jennifer Crusie states in one essay that, "the romance novel is based on the idea of an innate emotional justice in the universe, that the way the world works is that good people are rewarded and bad people are punished."³⁶ Making a similar point to that of Cawelti, in another essay, Crusie argues that "a romance is a love story with an optimistic, emotionally cathartic ending." It can be "anything you want as long as the main plot (a) traces a struggle to develop a committed relationship, (b) through the unabashed exploration of emotion on the page that (c) ends optimistically."³⁷ Pamela Regis, meanwhile, suggests that "a romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of a courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines."³⁸ For Regis, it is critical that the emphasis should lie on the heroine, and that the story of the courtship should include eight structural elements:

the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal.³⁹

In addition, according to Regis, it is desirable that a “wedding, dance or fete takes place,” that “the scapegoat [is] exiled” and “the bad [are] converted.”⁴⁰ She asserts that Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is a perfect example of the genre. Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, however, is a love story rather than a romance, as it has “most of the elements”⁴¹ but not all of them. In general, these definitions of the genre incorporate the same aspects put forward by the association of Romance Writers of America.⁴²

Despite being the most popular type of fiction in the United States,⁴³ romance is often viewed as an inferior genre by the literary establishment. Pamela Regis believes that “critical rejection of the romance novel emanated from the wave of feminism that arose in the 1960s.”⁴⁴ Since then, the argument that romance acts as an “enslaver” of women has been popular among the genre’s critics. Marriage as a “happy ending” has been interpreted as the heroine’s acceptance of her bondage, and as a reinforcement of traditional female roles. Moreover, critics have argued that these novels “are directed at female passivity,”⁴⁵ on the grounds that the women who tend to read them use them “to fill an emptiness in their lives;” rather than trying to change their lives, these women simply wait to get married. According to Regis, however, such arguments are based on partial truths. For instance, the happy endings of such novels imply “victory,” rather than bondage, for the heroine acquires not only married status, but also freedom. The women in these novels achieve their goals, and gain “control over their own property and companionate marriage.”⁴⁶ For readers of romance, it is not the predictable happy ending so much as the conflict, “the barrier” (an obstacle to the love relationship between the hero and the heroine) and the “point of ritual death” (the moment “when no happy resolution of the narrative seems possible”⁴⁷), which prove that “the heroines are not extinguished, they are freed.”⁴⁸

Kay Mussell argues that over the last few decades, there has been a change “in portrayals of female sexuality, emphasis on careers and equality,”⁴⁹ with romance novels now giving more consideration to male viewpoints. The social background of the protagonists has shifted from the aristocracy to the middle classes and blue-collar workers; ethnic minorities have

entered the genre; the heroines are no longer socially isolated; love stories have gained more psychological depth; the plots address topical social issues; and the quality of the prose has generally improved. The romance has absorbed the “conventions of the other forms of popular fiction – science fiction, mysteries and detection, the thriller, the Western.”⁵⁰ This has led to a variety of subgenres; the association of Romance Writers of America, for example, identifies the following categories: Contemporary Series Romance, Contemporary Single Title Romance, Historical Romance (in which the action takes place before 1945), Inspirational Romance, Novels with Strong Romantic Elements, Paranormal Romance, Regency Romance, Romantic Suspense, and Young Adult Romance.⁵¹

In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Joyce Carol Oates has rewritten a 19th-century historical romance with the aim of both exposing the hidden aspects of women’s lives, and adopting the characteristics of modern romance identified by Mussel, Regis and others. Linda Hutcheon believes that such examples of postmodern historiographic metafiction are new, not so much in their mixing of historical and fictive representation, but in their manner: “in the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretence of transparency and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history writing.”⁵² Oates’s narrative draws on historical detail (she lists the sources consulted in the acknowledgements), imagined facts, and on both the historical conventions of romance and its contemporary manifestations. In the narrative, romance conventions such as courtship, declarations of love, and “decent” behavior on the part of the heroines, have to be observed and commented upon by a narrator who calls herself a “chronicler” and is unaware of her own fictional status. This chronicler is the voice of Victorian morality and of the establishment itself. She wishes that she had “omnipotence,” so that she could “guide their [the Zinn sisters’] destinies in happier directions.”⁵³ The Zinn sisters, meanwhile, transgress social conventions in order to find happiness in their own empowerment and liberation. “For the narrator, this is a tragedy of waywardness, but from a contemporary perspective it is a triumph of emancipation.”⁵⁴ Oates imitates 19th-century romance conventions in her portrayal of the chronicler, and then subverts them in her portrayal of the heroines. In doing so, she also mocks the narrator’s conservatism and her strict, repressive morals.

A 19th-century romance would have consisted of a love story featuring an aristocratic, rich and isolated heroine, who would have acted in line with strict societal mores (to the pleasure of the novel’s judgmental narrator). Oates’s parody inverts the idealistic picture of obedient and mute heroines,

and transforms them into assertive women who take their fate into their hands. Deirdre is the first daughter to escape her prescribed lot: she is abducted in a balloon in broad daylight, and later reappears as a medium. The second daughter, Malvinia, pursues an acting career. The third, Constance Philippa, flees from her newlywed husband to become a man, ending the novel as a cowboy. The fourth daughter, Samantha, stays at home, but turns her hand to various challenges: she helps her father in his laboratory, and invents ingenious products, such as the *self-filling pen*, the *bicycle-umbrella*, and *pulp-paper bandages*.⁵⁵ Only Octavia follows tradition and marries a rich widower.

The chronicler/narrator – a scrupulous, conformist, conservative and judgmental woman – believes that her role is not only to record events, but also to comment on them. A tension thus arises between the narrator's voice and that of the daughters. As Oates herself suggests, the struggle is linguistic: “the narrator... is the very voice of the era; the ‘good,’ ‘prim,’ ‘admonishing,’ ‘ladylike’ voice of repression most, or all, women have internalized since girlhood.... To outwit, escape, extinguish this crippling narrator is the sisters’ only hope.”⁵⁶ Gavin Cologne-Brookes writes that “...in order to find their individual freedom, each of the Zinn sisters has to defy the very language of nineteenth-century American patriarchal culture.”⁵⁷ The task for the daughters is not only to determine their mode of life in such a strongly patriarchal system, but also to invent new ways to speak about their lives. The novel is written in archaic language, using old forms and outdated concepts. This means, for example, that they have to create a language for speaking about sexuality (something that the narrator avoids and obviously fears). The narrator is quick to judge the young ladies’ behavior as either “excusable” or “inexcusable,” but she has no words for describing “love embraces,” and dismisses love-making as repellent for the reader or for the “Christian contingent”:

Having no capability, and indeed, no desire, so far as graphic descriptions of ‘love embraces’ are concerned, I shall make no attempt to sketch for the repelled reader precisely how The Beast emerged, to make a loathsome mockery of the love declarations, kisses, caresses, and other amorous indulgences.... I shall make no attempt to record, even for the interest of those employed in the profession of *morbid psychology*, with what suddenness The Beast blazed forth, in the midst of an embrace of extreme intimacy, announcing itself by a chuckling deep in

the damsel's throat and a brash flurry of activity, involving hands, feet, knees, and mouth of a sort never experienced in his lifetime, we may infer, by the incredulous man of letters.⁵⁸

The novel is constructed such that the narrator inevitably makes herself appear ridiculous, and her morals cannot be taken seriously. The daughters win, and form love relationships with their partners that are based on equality (companionate marriages, to use Regis's term). An imprisoned lady, Delphine Martineau, is rescued, and as in a fairy tale, the daughters inherit a tidy fortune. Oates's happy ending is not only about marriage, money, and freedom; it is also about the feminist empowerment of women. The daughters are confident enough to campaign for "Dress Reform, and Woman Suffrage and Equal Rights and... a *Single Moral Standard*."⁵⁹ One of them "had stepped forth publicly ... to place herself as a candidate, for the Presidency of the United States."⁶⁰ The final liberating act committed by one of the daughters is to burn the formula for her father's invention, "a device" that "once triggered will explode effortlessly and endlessly,"⁶¹ that is, in today's terms, something that resembles an atom bomb. This romance does not confine itself to narrow understandings of love relationships, but also reaches out to and connects with politics, culture, morals, and all aspects of social life. The heroines are liberated, rather than "extinguished;" but this occurs not only through marriage, as Regis suggests, but also through participation in society, being professionally active, and providing for themselves.

What makes *A Bloodsmoor Romance* a parody is namely the ironic distance that Oates creates between the chronicler, who is a representation of historical romance conventions, and the sisters, who in turn represent all that is new, rebellious and invigorating. To paraphrase Hutcheon's definition of parody, Oates imitates the principles of the traditional romance and sabotages them by revealing the concealed side of women's lives, such as their sexuality and creativity, and their desire to choose their own partners and to earn their own livings. Rewriting a historical romance in the 1980s, Oates also establishes her own critical distance from the 19th-century cultural context, and uses her late 20th-century perspective to depict the women's lives.

Oates's other romance, *Middle Age: A Romance*, subverts, to a certain extent, the tradition that Oates criticizes in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. Her 19th-century historical romance reads more like a contemporary novel with regard to such themes as emancipation, gender politics, and the professional and individual independence of women, than *Middle Age*, which is set in the 1990s. The rich suburban characters in *Middle Age* have forgotten the pathos

and enthusiasm of the “Woman Suffrage and Equal Rights” campaign, and have to rediscover it. If Oates incapacitates the 19th-century romance by giving it a feminist twist, so she challenges the late-20th century romance by exposing the characters’ adherence and submission to patriarchal morality, and mocking extreme feminist attitudes. In the wealthy suburbs of *Middle Age*, a novel that was written almost 20 years after *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and is set almost 100 years later in time, Oates envisions women engaged in organizing luncheons and country club socials, the modern equivalents of needlepoint and crochet. While *A Bloodsmoor Romance* portrays women as active and able to change their lives for the better, the female characters in *Middle Age* and *We Were The Mulvaneys* are much more submissive and passive. Oates is suggesting that the current patriarchal hold on middle-class women’s lives is more powerful, and the women less energetic and inventive, than in the 19th-century middle-class context. The Zinn sisters develop independent careers, while the *Middle Age* women fail to achieve such independence, despite having the financial means and college training that would allow them to do so. The Zinn sisters spurn arranged marriages, while the romantic liaisons in *Middle Age* are conducted within the confines of patriarchal tradition: the goal of a woman’s life is to get married. All of the middle-aged female characters have romantic memories of being presented at debutant parties and being married off by their families. The Zinn sisters look for companionate relationships, and ignore Mrs Zinn’s advice that “in the matter of marital relations... [it] is always best to think *not at all*: in the present, to think not of the future, nor of the past; and not even, if the trick be mastered, of the present itself. For as wisdom of the Old Testament instructs us, ‘This too shall pass.’”⁶² By contrast, the women and – ironically – also the men of *Middle Age* believe in Mrs Zinn’s advice, and live by it for many years. They are, in Jennifer Crusie’s words, “passive Cinderellas” in a world that proclaims individual freedom and assertiveness.

If the upper-class marriages are conventional, so the new-fangled love stories of *Middle Age* push the romance genre to extremes. For instance, Naomi Wlop (an allusion to the feminist, Naomi Wolf), Roger Cavanagh’s lover and the mother of his child, uses Roger for sex and money, and is not interested in sustaining a relationship. In her defiance of rules, beliefs, and traditions, she is both an extremist and a nihilist. She is the female impersonation of the “bad” hero that, in traditional romances, is tamed and converted into a reasonably well-behaved hero. Lionel Hoffmann, on the contrary, is the male incarnation of the naive heroine: his new love, for example, turns out to be a professional call-girl who makes a living out of sex. From Lionel Hoff-

mann's point of view, this love affair can be seen as a real romance; it rests on all the elements that are required for a romance, aside from a betrothal. The reader never learns how his beloved feels, however. These "romances" parody stereotypical "mid-life crises," in which middle-aged men seek to "save their lives" by having affairs with women who are half their age.

A different kind of "anti-romance" applies to Oates's middle-aged female characters: they offer themselves to their "beloveds" and suffer rejections, and they dream of affairs with other men that never actually occur. In order to shatter their illusions, Oates opens the novel with the death of the hero and then, using flashbacks, reconstructs the plots of the various love stories. *Middle Age* depicts unconsummated and delusional relationships that feature impotent and metaphorically "dead" men and women. In contrast to the Zinn sisters, who achieve liberation from patriarchal power and enter into "companionate marriages," the female and male characters of *Middle Age* fail to conduct romantic relationships, despite their many liberties and financial freedoms.

Both *Middle Age* and *A Bloodsmoor Romance* feature a number of love stories, although neither novel would satisfy Pamela Regis's strict definition of a romance. Nevertheless, Regis's eight defining elements can be identified in Marina Troy's relationship with Roger Cavanagh. Oates offers a very explicit description of the society in which these two characters "must court" – an exclusive, rich American suburb that is populated with wealthy, unhappy, middle-aged men and women. The hero and heroine meet through business: Marina has been appointed the "personal executer" of the late Adam Berendt's art collection, while Roger is his "estate executor." In the scenes taking place in Roger Cavanagh's office and Adam Berendt's house, the two characters become attracted to one another and experience feelings of passion. A psychological barrier stands between them, however, in the form of the imagined disapproval of their dead friend. This barrier can be removed (that is, the point of ritual death is reached) when the hero and heroine recover their real identities, reconcile their memories of their dead friend, and are finally ready for the relationship. Although Oates does not depict a romantic engagement scene, she implies one when Marina Troy goes to Roger Cavanagh, "impulsively, not caring that he might rebuff her,"⁶³ seeing him "as she'd never before seen him. He seemed to her young, invigorated; a figure of mystery."⁶⁴ In this scene, Oates is certainly suggesting a "lasting and permanent impact," although the credibility of their meeting is almost undermined by Oates's use of subtle irony. Then we read that "things happened swiftly between them,"⁶⁵ and a couple of pages later, in a section

suggestively called “The Lovers, By Night,” we read that they are discussing marriage, a new house and their love for one another. Oates makes this dialogue sound honest and truthful, appropriate to the way in which she has depicted the characters throughout the novel.

Thus we see that *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and *Middle Age* satirize the societies in which the novels are set. In Hutcheon’s opinion, such satire is “extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind,”⁶⁶ while the aim of modern parody is always intramural; there is no “negative judgment suggested in the ironic contrasting of texts.”⁶⁷ The combination of satire and parody has the effect of “bringing the ‘world’ into art.” As Oates observes, it is one way in which an artist can be socially involved, or “deeply bonded to his or her world.”⁶⁸

As explained above, *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is a postmodern parody of the romance genre and a satire on the social relations of the period in which it is set. Oates has written a romance that, according to 19th-century convention, should end in the heroines’ marriages. Instead, she subverts the genre by making her female characters behave in (for the 19th century, at least) unusual and unacceptable ways, such as engaging in sex before marriage, eloping on their wedding nights, changing their genders, and campaigning for women’s suffrage. The narrator’s comments enlighten the reader as to what kinds of behavior would have been expected at such a time. Oates wrote the narrative at the end of the 20th century in the wake of the “second wave” of feminism, and this influences her reconstruction of 19th-century reality. The modern reader, endowed with cultural insight and knowledge of the women’s movement, can perceive the futility of the narrator’s efforts to set things right and to reconcile the women’s actions with established tradition. Oates creates satire by juxtaposing the narrator’s conventionality with the unheard-of attitudes and behavior of these 19th-century upper-middle-class women.

Middle Age, meanwhile, is essentially a social satire on the modern American upper classes, as I explain in chapter three of this study. It subverts the conventions of modern romance, which, as suggested earlier in this chapter, tend to depict female protagonists as assertive and socially-involved individuals. *Middle Age* is thus a hybrid of social satire and postmodern parody of the romance genre.

Social Melodrama

If when writing romances, Oates adopts an ironic stance and frames her narratives as parodies and satires, by contrast, in *We Were The Mulvaneys* – her celebrated social melodrama and family saga – she writes in a sincere and

honest fashion. The narrative of this novel demands the postmodern reader to be open to a sentimental and dramatic depiction of family life in rural, 1970s America. Cawelti points out that one of the main focus points of a melodrama is the creation of “moral fantasy” about “the essential rightness of the world order.”⁶⁹ In Oates’s narrative, this consists of the “essential” moral purity of Marianne Mulvaney. This innocent and unfortunate character suffers first rape and then banishment from her family, yet does not blame anyone for her fate. Marianne’s submissiveness and weakness are reminiscent of 19th-century melodramatic heroines, rather than the modern American 17-year-old (the rape occurs in 1976). Oates opts to avoid the typical response to a date rape case in present-day America – therapy for the daughter and her family, and a lawsuit against the rapist – and instead portrays a girl who recoils from her experience, suffers, becomes anorexic, and recovers. Eventually, her suffering is rewarded: having gone through a long period of moral torture and learning, the family is reunited; while her father, who lacked the required resilience, dies. Oates thus presents the reader with a happy ending.

The suffering in this narrative is meaningful in just one aspect: it leads to the truth about the members of the family. The narrator, the youngest son Judd, resolves at the outset of the novel to utter “the truth, even if it hurts. Particularly if it hurts.”⁷⁰ The “true character” of each family member can only be exposed when times are hard, and when people have to make difficult choices under compelling circumstances. The truth thus remains hidden in the first part of the narrative, when the Mulvaneys live in an idyllic rural setting and are successful; and is revealed when the crisis occurs, the family falls apart, and it becomes difficult to make choices. At this point, we see how Marianne’s father succumbs to pressure and never recovers, while Marianne is resilient and finds the strength to recover.

The features that Cawelti ascribes to a traditional social melodrama – “heightening of feeling and moral conflict … a sense of rightness of the world order”⁷¹ – are also the features of this narrative. The “rightness of the world order,” or the “benevolent humanly oriented world order,” is primarily to be found in the characters of Marianne and her mother, whose moral courage rises above the injustices that have been inflicted upon them. Oates portrays the pain and suffering endured by Marianne and Corinne in an extremely emotional way, thus satisfying the main requirement for a melodrama genre: “to arouse direct and immediate emotion in its audience.”⁷²

It was all gone, wasn’t it? Corinne hadn’t quite realized. The boisterous half hour or so when all the children, home from

school, crowded into the kitchen breathless and excited exchanging the day's news, teasing, joking, laughing, headed for the refrigerator – the dogs barking ecstatically, for it was the high point of their day too.... Those wonderful years when Mikey...

Now, all was changed. Irrevocably?⁷³

This paragraph, which describes precious and enjoyable memories from the recent past, is framed by the statement, "all was gone." Recalling the good life that has been changed irrevocably by the rape, Oates's construction inevitably creates feelings of nostalgia and melancholy. For Oates the writer, the whole narrative is a tribute to her past, and to that of her parents and grandparents.⁷⁴ She does not use ironic distancing, a popular mechanism in postmodern fiction, which is used:

to make us look to the past from the acknowledged distance of the present, a distance which inevitably conditions our ability to know that past. The ironies produced by that distancing are what prevent the postmodern from being nostalgic: there is no desire to return to the past as a time of simpler or more worthy values. These ironies also prevent antiquarianism: there is no value to the past in and of itself. It is the conjunction of the present and the past that is intended to make us question – analyze, try to understand – both how we make and make sense of our culture.⁷⁵

Returning to the 1950s, as she does in many novels, Oates adheres more to the modernist idea of nostalgia as the "past beyond all but aesthetic retrieval",⁷⁶ cultural myths must be recreated, for it is not possible to recapture the past, as Jameson suggests. When ironic distance is not used, such direct involvement with the past in fiction becomes nostalgic.

In addition to exposing the reader to the protagonists' emotional world and sentiments, Oates uses mechanisms of suspense that transform the novel into a "page-turner." Suspense is created by the very wording of the title: the phrase, "we were the Mulvaneys," implies that the family are the Mulvaneys no longer. The suspense is sustained throughout the narrative through the use of implied questions, such as "why they are not the Mulvaneys and what happened to them?" Often chapters begin with an intriguing and melancholic statement, such as: "No one would be able to name what happened, not even

Marianne.... Corinne Mulvaney, the mother should have detected. Or suspected..."⁷⁷ The answer, in turn, is revealed 100 pages later. Meanwhile, the reader's attention to the unfolding family drama is held by interwoven clues and hints. At the same time, Oates creates suspense on a smaller scale, such as in the chapter, "Strawberries And Cream." In this chapter, Oates plays a game of "cat and mouse," with neither the reader nor the family knowing what has happened. Oates treads slowly, making a suggestion, offering a hint, and then retreating again. For example, Marianne "methodically emptied her garment bag of everything except the satin prom dress, her fingers moving numbly and blindly"⁷⁸ (a suggestion of inner tension); then she hangs it in the "farthest corner of her closet,"⁷⁹ clearly because she does not want to see it. These statements are followed by almost two pages of text about the clocks in the house and time. Then Marianne thinks about her watch, "knowing, or guessing, that the crystal was cracked"⁸⁰ – a suggestion that something deeply unpleasant has happened. A few paragraphs later, an italicized paragraph is used to reveal Marianne's memory of what she has been told: "*You know you want to, Marianne – why'd you come with me if you don't? ...*"⁸¹ In this way, Oates slowly reveals what has happened, detail by detail, keeping her reader's attention riveted on the book. At the same time, she is picturing the emotions of a girl who, as we later learn, has been raped and who cannot find the language to express what has happened.

Oates is very convincing in her portrayal of the family's experiences, which are conveyed to the reader in an emotional, rather than in a rational, way. Minimal distance is created between the reader and the characters, allowing Oates to evoke the maximum degree of empathy. One of the novel's reviewers perceptively notes:

In the hands of a lesser writer, this could be the stuff of a bad television movie. But this is Oates's 26th novel, and by now she knows her material and her craft to perfection. *We Were The Mulvanneys* is populated with such richly observed and complex characters that we can't help but care about them, even as we wait for disaster to strike them down.⁸²

In an interview, Oates comments that *We Were The Mulvanneys* "is one people can read. I get lots of letters about that novel. Women's groups read it and talk about it. They identify with Corinne, the mother. So I think it's very accessible."⁸³ Although the novel's popularity is based on readers' identification with the characters, and as such is more a question of the novel's story-

line and less of its aesthetics, this does not necessarily diminish the book's artistic value. *We Were The Mulvaneys* is also one of Oates's best-known novels owing to its selection by the Oprah Winfrey Book Club (it subsequently became a bestseller on the *New York Times*' list). In 2002, the director Peter Werner dramatized the book to create a television melodrama.

Many other Oates's novels, like *Blonde*, or family sagas, which are discussed in chapter one of this study, also frequently slide into this mode of melodramatic rendition. One example is the 30-page scene in *The Falls*, in which Ariah Burnaby's son, Chandler, is called to negotiate with a young woman's kidnapper. The scene opens with Chandler receiving a call for help from the police, and finishes with "a single sharp crack, a gunshot."⁸⁴ The reader immediately concludes that Chandler has been killed, but half a page later, it turns out that the kidnapper has committed suicide. Like the scene described above, in which Marianne's experiences are gradually revealed, Oates employs techniques of suspense, hints at brutal violence, stretches out the duration of events by inserting memories, introduces details about Chandler's life, his relationship with his girlfriend and his brother, and so forth. The reader is kept under the apprehension that something bad will happen. In the end, however, the evil power – the kidnapper – dies, and the good embodied in Chandler's actions wins.

Peter Brooks suggests that "melodrama has the distinct value of being about recognition and clarification, about how to be clear what the stakes are and what their representative signs mean, and how to face them." Melodrama substitutes for the rite of sacrifice an urging toward combat in life, an active, lucid confrontation of evil.⁸⁵ Cawelti, in turn, believes that "there are basic continuities of themes and structure" that survive over time in the genre of social melodrama: "romantic love," "the defense of monogamous, family oriented relationships between men and women and the attempt to define true and false conceptions of success and status."⁸⁶ Cawelti suggests that "social melodrama is primarily a genre of the well-established middle class for whom these particular values are of most importance."⁸⁷ This genre thus helps to bring "new social circumstances and ideas to the developing middle class sense of social value," and a means by which the middle classes can adjust to "social and cultural changes."⁸⁸

Not every one of Joyce Carol Oates's melodramas is blessed with a happy ending, however. One example of a similarly melodramatic, somewhat histrionic rendition, that ends tragically is that of the novella, *Black Water*, which depicts an inexperienced young woman, Kelly Kelleher, who is in love with a powerful and much older senator. Driving Kelly to her hotel, the

Senator loses control of the car and crashes into a stream of “black water.” The Senator manages to escape, leaving Kelly behind. The whole novella thus consists of one extended drowning scene. Oates creates a sense of melodrama by repeatedly inserting both recent and remote memories into the drowning “story.” As a result, the plot line zigzags between the past and the present. The drowning episode is stretched out as if it had been filmed with a slow-motion camera, and the narrative is interrupted and contrasted with scenes of the party that Kelly has just left. The reader is overwhelmed and devastated to read such a meticulous rendering of this young woman’s death, trapped in car below the surface of the water:

As the water splashed and churned about her mouth, foul tasting water not water, like no water she knew. But she was holding her head as high as she could, her neck trembling with the effort. She had pushed her face, her mouth, into a pocket of wan air in a space she could not have named except vaguely to indicate that was beyond the passenger’s seat of the capsized vehicle, beneath the glove compartment? – a space where her knees had been when she’d been sitting. Her knees, her feet.⁸⁹

Almost from the very beginning, the reader knows that Kelly Kelleher is drowning in “murky churning water.” What captures the reader’s attention and holds it, however, is the sense of emotion, the gradual revelation of details about Kelly’s life, and the glimmer of hope that she might still be rescued. Oates enhances the dramatic effect by repeating certain phrases. In the first third of the novella, she repeats the phrase, “am I going to die? Like this?”,⁹⁰ suggesting surprise, and both premonition and disbelief. Then, Oates repeats, “I am here,”⁹¹ suggesting that the protagonist is facing up to the reality of her situation, and is experiencing feelings of fear and panic, while also still hoping that the Senator will find her and rescue her. In the last third of the novella, the reader is repeatedly faced with a cold observation of fact: “As the black water filled her lungs, and she died.”⁹² This last quote also completes the novella.

Like *We Were The Mulvaneys* or *The Falls*, the story depicted in this novella is driven by one of the key features of melodrama, an “intense emotional and ethical drama, based on the ... struggle of good and evil.”⁹³ Both Kelly and Marianne are virtuous and innocent women, set against an evil and unethical world order. If in Marianne’s case, the evil is concealed in her immediate social surroundings and culture, Kelly is caught up in the evil and

corruption that are inherent in the political system itself. The last moments of Kelly's life are depicted emphatically against a background of symbolic American power: while choking in the black water, she hears "the rackete noise of firecrackers. High overhead the flapping of the St. John family's shimmering American flag."⁹⁴ Kelly dies on the evening of Independence Day. In Marianne's case, meanwhile, Independence Day provides the occasion for a family reunion, following many years of separation. In *We Were The Mulvanneys*, Oates corroborates to provide the happy ending required by the genre of melodrama: virtue and good conquer evil in the social order. In *The Falls*, in turn, Dirk Burnaby's work to improve the environment is finally acknowledged. In *Black Water*, however, virtue is overpowered by evil, the latter disguised as a politician. For Oates, the term melodrama is appropriate when two conditions are met: the protagonist is defenseless, innocent, and naive, but also virtuous and morally superior; and "the rightness of world order" is disturbed. Including elements of melodrama in her narratives provides Oates with an easily-accessible mode of reflecting on good and evil in contemporary American society.

The Appropriation of Crime Fiction

Like her approach to the romance genre, Oates uses subgenres of crime fiction to reflect upon, rework and parody the fiction of the past. She has written a complex parody of a classic detective story entitled *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, and in other novels, she includes parodic motifs and passages that are evocative of thrillers and hard-boiled detective stories. In addition, over the last two decades, Oates has written a number of suspense novels and thrillers, and participated in discussions about the popularity of crime fiction.⁹⁵ As I explained in chapter two of this study, *What I Lived For* is a postmodern parody of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and in this chapter I have shown that *Middle Age* is a satiric parody of a romance. At the same time, these novels also contain passages and subplots that are written so as to imitate detective stories and thrillers. This allows Oates to bridge the gap between popular fiction and the serious novel, and to explore the effects of such a fusion.

In *What I Lived For*, Oates parodies a hard-boiled detective story. The novel is set "in the corrupt and violent American city ruled by a hidden alliance of rich and respectable businessmen, politicians, and criminals."⁹⁶ Like many a detective in genre fiction, her protagonist criss-crosses the city in his car. Unlike the detectives created by Raymond Chandler or Samuel Hammett, however, Corky Corcoran is weak and corrupt; given that his friends commit offenses, he is unable to report these to the police or expose

them to the press. According to John Cawelti, a brief survey of the genre of detective fiction reveals a persistent human fascination with horror over the centuries. What has changed is “the kind of crime” that takes centre stage. In 19th-century England and America, crime stories focused on the family, since the latter was considered to be the locus of “morality and social authority.” The classic detective genre was born in the stories of Edgar Alan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. Their formula for detective fiction had six main phases: “(a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and clues; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement,”⁹⁷ although not necessarily in this order. In the 1920s and 1930s, the focus of crime stories shifted to organized crime, and the rise and fall of the gangster-protagonist. Later, in the 1970s, organized crime syndicates became popular subjects; stories featured powerful families, such as that in Puzo’s *The Godfather*, and corrupt official figures. Cawelti argues that this 1970s trend of contrasting powerful criminal organizations with weak social organizations expresses “a deep uncertainty about the adequacy of our traditional social institutions to meet the needs of individuals for security, for justice, for a sense of significance.”⁹⁸ The writers who developed the hard-boiled detective story, such as R. Chandler, R. Macdonald and B. Halliday, achieved both commercial and artistic success in doing so.

The key difference between the classic detective story and the hard-boiled story lies in the former’s preoccupation with solving the crime by resort to intellectual means, and the restoration of order in the world; and the latter’s emphasis on “the detective becoming judge as well as investigator and the intimidation and temptation of the detective.”⁹⁹ The detective is a “traditional man of virtue in an amoral and corrupt world.” He may be cynical, but he is also “honorable and noble.”¹⁰⁰ The story deals with corrupt corporations and law-enforcement institutions, and the police themselves obstruct the solving of the crime. In her essay, “Raymond Chandler: Genre and ‘Art,’” Oates calls the hard-boiled detective story “a demonic anti-pastoral in which ‘laws’ of probability are continuously defied, and its primary truth is that men and women, though more frequently women, if they are beautiful, are rotten to the core.”¹⁰¹

Imitating the crime fiction genre, Oates opens *What I Lived For* with a typical, highly-dramatic mafia liquidation scene. One can imagine the scene having been filmed in slow motion, in silence: the hired hitmen empty their guns and escape in a fast car, while the reader is left to contemplate the victim dying from his wounds. This could be any opening of a thriller, or an action film, with Oates rendering the scene from the dying man’s point of

view so as to shock the reader and heighten the sense of emotional involvement. The shooting, “six staccato bursts of fire,” takes place on Christmas Eve, as the man to be shot, Timothy Corcoran, is hanging “an evergreen wreath to the front door.”¹⁰² There follows a gothic scene featuring a lot of blood: “the fan-shaped stoop … began to glisten immediately with his blood,” “he was coughing blood, choking in blood,” “the wreath would be soaked in blood,” “the door too would be splashed with blood.”¹⁰³ Oates does not spare the reader a detailed description of the dying man’s physical sensations: “his chest has exploded in a pain beyond pain,” the bullets “ripped through his lungs,” “went wild and struck the nape of his neck and lodged in the base of his skull.”¹⁰⁴ Then “inside the house, a woman began to scream.”¹⁰⁵

The novel’s prologue promises a sequence typical of the thriller and classic detective genres, which “begins with an unsolved crime and moves towards the elucidation of its mystery.”¹⁰⁶ A detective, McClure, questions the witnesses, the funeral is held, and some background information is provided about the family. The first chapter then takes the reader into the formulaic beginning of a mock hard-boiled detective story: 30 years later, Corky Corcoran is the inquiring protagonist, sitting in his car in a traffic jam. Oates introduces an additional element of detection: Corky has to find his step-daughter, Thalia. At the same time, Corky learns about the circumstances of his father’s murder, the corrupt dealings of his friends, and the rape and suicide of Marilee Plummer. The “explanation of the solution” to his father’s murder is only given 500 pages later, along with the answers to other mysteries. Although the feeling of suspense that Oates creates at the beginning ebbs away, the reader’s attention is instead caught by Corky’s restlessness, and by his rush of thoughts and hesitations. Corky is caught up in ambiguous circumstances, and one unresolved situation leads to another. The reader becomes involved and seeks answers through Corky, while the latter wanders through a labyrinth of confusing and dubious connections, relations and dealings. Through the character of Corky, the story of Union City corruption slowly unfolds before the reader’s eyes. Unlike the incorruptible and noble archetype of the hard-boiled detective, Corky is a subversive anti-hero: in addition to being involved in corruption, nepotism and economic crime, he is also sexually interested in his step-daughter. Searching for the truth and his missing step-daughter, he discloses the unpleasant truth about himself, his family and his friends – all of whom are corrupt and decadent, including his step-daughter. Corky’s maxim is: “Know who your friends are, and who your enemies are. And never confuse them.”¹⁰⁷ Ironically, precisely the opposite is

true of Corky's situation: his friends and his enemies are in fact the same people.

In *What I Lived For*, Oates's use of a detective-story/thriller framework creates suspense in the narrative and holds the reader's attention. As Michael Cohen argues, "mysteries appeal *because they externalize processes of inference, and processes of inference pervade our lives*, whether as deliberate and conscious acts or as automatic and unconscious ones."¹⁰⁸ According to Cohen, inference is part of the process of perception that enables us to get along in the world, and the "mystery story taps into basic processes of perception."¹⁰⁹ The mysteries surrounding the death of Corky's father and the puzzling appearances and disappearances of his step-daughter certainly trigger the reader's curiosity and desire to find out what is going on. At the end, when the reader expects a moral triumph, Oates shows that such an ending would be logically impossible in a place like Union City. The truth has been revealed, but the world has not changed.

Likewise, Oates presents a satirical interpretation of detective work in one of the sub-plots of *Middle Age: A Romance*. In this novel, detection is linked with people's knowledge of their closest friends and loved ones. Owen Cutler hires Elias West, a private detective, to find his runaway wife, Augusta. West finds Augusta, they have a love affair, and then West helps her to disappear again while he pretends to continue to search for her. Augusta, in turn, sets out to find out who Adam Berendt really was. Just as the novel is a parody of a contemporary romance, the detective-story sub-plot also contains parodic and satiric elements. Augusta proves to be a serious "detective" when she uncovers Adam Berendt's true identity. In both cases, the "detectives" keep their findings to themselves; mysteries are revealed to them and to the reader, but not to other characters. In this way, Oates imitates writers of detective stories who challenge the classic conventions of their genre.¹¹⁰

Oates's earlier attempt to parody classic detective fiction resulted in a very complex novel, *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984), which brought her neither critical nor commercial success. This novel was conceived as part of the quintet of gothic novels introduced earlier in this chapter. *Mysteries of Winterthurn* is a parody of the 19th-century detective novel; it is written in archaic language and reflects various past literary styles. The old-fashioned narrator is a "connoisseur(s) of Murder and Mystery."¹¹¹ The novel is set in the fictional 19th-century Winterthurn City and its surroundings. Detective Xavier Kilgarvan solves three complicated murder cases, although the solutions are found by accident rather than as a result of logical investigation, and the explanations of the murder cases remain incomplete. The "connoisseur"

presents a grand narrative that features a labyrinth of story lines, crowded with characters and events. If one of the main requirements of a classic detective story is clarity, here, many clues lead to dead ends, thousands of details serve to create an elaborate atmosphere but have nothing to do with solving the crimes, and one mystery follows on from another. Many of the characters believe in apparitions and ghostlike creatures, and experience dreams and nightmares. The action takes place in the dungeons and attics of Glen Mawr Manor, and in cursed, remote places. People are killed by axes and hanged in strange positions; mummified babies are found in the drawers of Chippendale sideboards; spring lambs and factory girls are mutilated. Yet on top of it all, a strange painting entitled “*Trompe L’Oeil*” in the haunted Honeymoon suite suggests that it all might just be a deception.

The classic detective, as Cawelti stresses, has “special competence, and give[s] the reader confidence that, however great the obstacles and dangers, the hero will be capable of overcoming them.”¹¹² While Xavier Kilgarvan attempts to be such a detective, in the editor’s notes prior to the first two murder cases, the narrator describes him as inexperienced and somewhat inferior. Prior to the last murder case, however, he is described as “brilliant.” At the outset, he lacks insight and strength of character; investigating the dungeon, he is “perspiring,” “his teeth came near to chattering,”¹¹³ and he runs away sobbing. Oates inspires pity in the reader for Kilgarvan’s professional misfortunes, and his lack of command. At the end of the first case, he “was never to know, with any degree of certainty” whether what he saw “was naught but a hallucination.”¹¹⁴ The narrator knows much more than the detective and comments on the latter’s actions, calling him (with some irony) “our idealistic Xavier Kilgarvan.”¹¹⁵ Having solved the case of the “Devil’s Half-Acre” ritualistic murders, Kilgarvan’s second case requires him to identify his own brother as an accomplice, while a jury declares the main murderer not guilty. In his third case, “Bloodstained Bridal Gown,” Kilgarvan keeps the name of the actual murderer a secret. His ideals of logical and rational thinking and idealistic faith in honesty result in disillusionment and punishment. His mother, for example, “suffered a nervous collapse” because he “betrayed” his brother, and Xavier Kilgarvan is “evicted from his home.”¹¹⁶ At the end of his third case, Kilgarvan insists he has “failed most conspicuously in [his] chosen field.”¹¹⁷

Oates both follows the conventions of classic detective fiction and transgresses them. According to John Cawelti, the classic detective story “showed a particular fascination with the hidden secrets and guilts that lay within the family circle.”¹¹⁸ In *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, the majority of the characters

are related; in the first and third cases the victims are relatives of the murderers; while the second case is an example of a social-sexual crime, involving lower-class victims who do not originate from the killer's family. With this second case, Oates challenges those limitations that were considered essential to the genre in the 19th century: the "transformation of the crime into a game or puzzle," and "the focus only on the domestic crime as opposed to political or social crimes."¹¹⁹ Cawelti suggests that these limitations had a cultural meaning: they offered a "release from doubt and guilt generated at least in part by the decline of traditional moral and spiritual authorities, and the rise of new social and intellectual movements that emphasized a hypocrisy and guilt of respectable middle-class society."¹²⁰ Escapism for the reader was created via a reaffirmation of the "existing social order," and denial of any social or moral responsibility for the crime by turning it into a game. By contrast, Oates's detective is unable to restore order, and the reader is left puzzled. While drawing striking parallels with classic detective fiction, Oates also creates "critical distance," to use Linda Hutcheon's term. Although the detective exposes the killers, the reader is not persuaded that they were indeed the killers: on the contrary, the detective's behavior, his vague illness and slow recovery create a degree of ambiguity which is hardly ever found in the resolution or "explanation of the solution" phase of a classic detective story. It is only in the Journals (her published diaries) and in some interviews that Oates has disclosed the name of the murderer; the reader of *Winterthurn Mysteries* is left guessing. As Hutcheon has rightly noted, postmodern parodies "use and abuse the conventions of both popular and élite literature, and do so in such a way that they can actually *use* the invasive culture industry to challenge its own commodification processes from within."¹²¹

What I Lived For and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* are impressively long novels (608 and 482 pages respectively) that feature complex plots and well-developed characters. By contrast, in the 1990s, Oates returned to writing thrillers and combinations of crime stories, horror stories and serial-killer thrillers, each an average of 200 pages in length. Some of these novels are examples of pure genre fiction, with stereotypical characters and formulaic plots, while others include more complex characters and plots. Oates published two thrillers: the novella, *The Rise of Life On Earth* (1991); and *Zombie: A Novel* (1995). Writing as Rosamond Smith, in 1992 she published another thriller, *Snake Eyes*,¹²² which was based on an actual, highly-publicized incident involving Norman Mailer and a convicted killer,¹²³ and two other thrillers featuring serial killers: *Starr Bright Will Be With You Soon* (1999) and *The Barrens* (2001). In 2003, she began publishing under yet

another pseudonym, that of Lauren Kelly. To date, “Lauren Kelly” has written three mystery stories (or suspense novels, as they are subtitled). Each of these novels focuses on how a young woman has to untangle a mystery that had a big impact on her past. The novels explore unresolved crimes, mysteries, and imagined crimes, and the style employed balances between that of a mystery story and a thriller. While Oates invented the Rosamond Smith pseudonym to test the response to her work when it was not published under the Joyce Carol Oates “brand,” today, together with Lauren Kelly, this pseudonym serves as a form of escapism from complex artistic projects, such as *What I Lived For*, or *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. Of all these crime stories, suspense novels, and thrillers published under different names (including Oates’s own), *Zombie* has been the most successful, winning the Horror Writers Association’s Bram Stoker Award, and being dramatized at the New York International Fringe Festival in 2008.

Although Oates’s interest in writing crime stories is not new, her focus on serial killers and on the thriller genre in particular, does mark a departure for her. In her crime stories and thrillers, Oates is immersed in investigating motives for criminal and violent behavior, especially when irrationality and pathology are involved. On the one hand, Oates has always been interested in the darker side of human consciousness. On the other, she is certainly influenced by contemporary public interest in serial killers,¹²⁴ especially such notorious cases as those of Jeffrey Dahmer, Gary Mark Gilmore and Ted Bundy, whose biographical details she has reworked in her crime stories and thrillers. In one essay, Oates comments that the serial killer “has become our debased, condemned, yet eerily glorified Noble Savage, the vestiges of the frontier spirit, the American *isolato*.¹²⁵” For Oates, such a figure provides perfect material for a thriller.

David Glover indicates that the difference between the detective story and the thriller is that the latter “persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock.”¹²⁶ The thriller is thus characterized by the vastness of the threat and by the intensity of the reader’s experience. The detective work in such narratives is normally dominated by this kind of “psychic and epistemological turbulence,”¹²⁷ and remains insignificant. When a thriller features a serial killer, the writer is faced with another kind of challenge altogether, as serial killers defy “the belief that murderers always have rational motives for murder such as greed or jealousy,”¹²⁸ and that they know their victims. Thus, instead of presenting a logical investigation, the writer has to devise convincing ways to present an irrational-

al murderer, and show how a rational detective might be able to catch such a criminal.

When combining the serial killer and thriller genres, Oates is at her best when she continuously writes from the killer's point of view. In *Zombie* and in *The Rise of Life On Earth*, Oates avoids the problem of how to reveal the killer's identity, thus spoiling the plot or breaking the suspense. However, in her novel, *The Barrens*, which is told from the interrogating protagonist's point of view with inclusions from the killer's perspective, the suspense ebbs once the identity of the killer has been established. David Schmid identifies the danger that "once you remove the mystery of the killer's identity by revealing it at the beginning of the text the result is a police procedural or a thriller rather than a traditional whodunit."¹²⁹ It might be argued, following Brenda Daly, that if *The Barrens* were a "parody of a subgenre, the psychological killer,"¹³⁰ then the sabotage of the tension would be intentional.

Oates's goal is not to reveal "who did it" in convincing fashion, but rather to explore the psychology of the serial killer. For her, such a killer is an "enigma," "one who murders for passion's capricious sake."¹³¹ Her serial killers include artists, an exotic dancer, a janitor, and a nurse's aide; as such, they come from a variety of professions and backgrounds, allowing Oates to explore the motivations underlying their behavior. In her essay, "Three American Gothics," Oates describes a serial killer as a character in a gothic novel:

The 'serial killer' with no apparent motive for his monstrous crimes except the gratification of desire has become, in the 1990s, an icon of pop culture. The most difficult of criminals to trace, since his connections with his victims are almost always wholly imagined, such a killer is a romantic figure in reverse: sexually obsessed, isolated by his compulsions, the very portrait of demonic possession; one whose entire outward life has been constructed as a means to satisfy the forbidden.¹³²

Furthermore, Oates claims that a number of aspects surrounding serial killings – such as fetishism and cannibalism – mirror metaphors in religious practices, including Christianity, which bring psychotic behavior closer to "normal" behavior; and she explores these ideas in her thrillers.

The Barrens is a thriller that incorporates elements of a classic detective story. The inquiring protagonist, Matt McBride, is the "detective." The serial killer is MAN UNKNOWN, or Joseph Gavin, who kills young women and

uses their body parts – including their vocal cords, tendons, eyes and hair – in the mannequin-like sculptures that he makes out of scrap metal, molded wax, sand, clay, and similar materials. Oates contrives blood-curdling scenes that consist of detailed descriptions of mutilated bodies and the perverted mind of the killer, the threatening atmosphere suggesting that violence may erupt at any moment. The reader discovers the killer's identity relatively early in the novel – his “text” is printed in a separate typeface – and the suspense ebbs, as suggested above. The tension and excitement in the novel are then provided by the reader's concern for the lives of Matt McBride's and the female characters.

The inquiring protagonist, Matt McBride, is the quintessential bored executive from an affluent suburb. He works as an associate in a real estate company, but actually wants to be a photographer. Like many wealthy Oatesian men, McBride fits a stereotype: he is trapped by the Protestant work ethic, unable to do what he really wants to; he has to endure social pressures and join various clubs, his marriage is falling apart, and he has affairs with other women. He is on the verge of starting an affair with Duana Zwolle, a woman who then disappears. Eventually he plays a dual role: he becomes a police suspect, while simultaneously investigating Zwolle's disappearance on his own.

Starr Bright Will Be With You Soon, meanwhile, features a stereotypical female serial killer who was raped in the past, and is now taking her revenge on men. She works as an exotic dancer, sporting glamorous looks and expensive clothes. In her handbag, she carries “cosmetics, amphetamine and Valium tablets,” and “a pearl-handled stainless steel carving knife with a slender five inch blade,”¹³³ with which she mutilates men's bodies. Her twin sister, Lily, is a respected housewife and mother, who “stayed away from violent movies, never watched offensive television,”¹³⁴ and who is unaware of her sister's deeds. At the end of the novel, both women are united in prayer.

At the outset, Oates quotes R.L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The quote implies that the two sisters are two sides of the same person, and represent the light and dark sides of a personality. One of them will always be good, while the other will always be bad. *Starr Bright Will Be With You Soon* is a simpler version of another psychological thriller written by Oates, *Lives of the Twins* (or *Kindred Passions*, as the British edition is entitled), which looks at how twins can feel incomplete if they are separated. In *Snake Eyes*, meanwhile, Oates presents two sets of twins: the lawyer Michael O'Meara had a twin brother who died by drowning, and his sons are twins. In

The Barrens, furthermore, one of the twin sisters is a murder victim. In these ways, Oates seems to be exploring the various roles that twins can adopt: murderers, siblings of a victim, or children who are very close and can swap places. Moreover, these novels were written by Oates's alter ego, Rosamond Smith, who can be seen as a twin of sorts. For Brenda Daly, the whole notion of twins or doubles is an expression of "our inter-relatedness, our kinship,"¹³⁵ which is supposed to "undermine 'the myth of the isolated individual'"¹³⁶ and encourage society to become more caring.

These novels have an additional motif in common, that of their setting: namely, middle-class suburbs, places where one would expect to be safe, but which are in fact unable to protect their inhabitants from serial killers. In order to create a shocking contrast to this urbane environment, Oates employs a gothic style that draws on European and American traditions. European gothic is manifest in settings such as haunted manors, featuring ghosts, vampires and virgins. Since America lacks both an aristocracy and castles, American gothic style has been shaped by different motifs, such as violent forces of nature or slavery. The setting for Oates's gothic novels varies from manors or valleys (as in *Bellefleur* and *Mysteries of Winterthurn*) to swamps and marshy forests (as in *The Barrens*), and the home of a serial killer – the cellars, attics and bathrooms of *Zombie*. Malcolm Bradbury calls American gothic "carpenter's gothic," a term that he borrows from William Gaddys's title, *Carpenter's Gothic*. Bradbury argues that this tradition stands for the "conditions [of America] which are generally dark and destructive and, as in good Gothic, they impose terrible pressures on mind, logic, and human sensitivity."¹³⁷ American gothic intertwines myth, history and concern about the political and social conditions of the day:

The shadows of patriarchy, slavery, and racism, as of Puritan extremes of imagination and of political horror of a failed utopianism, fall across [these] works of American gothic and direct its shape toward a concern with social and political issues as well as toward an organized introspection concerning the evil that lies within the self.¹³⁸

A true gothic thriller, *Zombie* is "intended to chill the spine and curdle the blood."¹³⁹ The plot focuses on the main character, Q_P_ (or Quentin), who is a sexual pervert and a serial killer. He has received a suspended sentence for sexual offences, and must report to a probation officer and visit a psychiatrist. He manages to manipulate his supervisors, however, and behind their backs

indulges in his passion for creating a zombie. He picks up young men, sexually abuses them, and then tries to lobotomize them by damaging their brains with an ice pick, in order to paralyze their will. His experiments fail repeatedly, however, leaving him with dead bodies. Oates creates flesh-creeping and graphic descriptions of the setting, and of lobotomy operations performed on live – and often conscious – victims. She describes the smell of rotting bodies, blood in the bathtub, “the shower curtain so stained and speckled, … underwear wadded and soaked with blood & pubic hairs … on the floor.”¹⁴⁰ The house has an unused cellar with a cistern where Q_P_ installs his “operating theatre” and a dark attic in which something “glittering & plastic”¹⁴¹ is hidden, if we are to believe the narrator.

In the case of the nurse’s aide and serial killer, Kathleen Hennessy, in *The Rise Of Life On Earth*, the killings are not rendered so explicitly; Oates chooses to imply them, rather than describe them in detail. The truly stomach-churning scenes occur when Oates describes Kathleen’s actions towards herself. In one such scene, Kathleen performs an abortion on herself, cutting into her uterus with surgical knives whilst kneeling in the bathtub. In this novella, Oates’s version of gothic includes a lot of blood, cutting into human bodies, and gruesome descriptions that spare little detail:

The gravest danger was from infection of the birth canal unless the gravest danger was from hemorrhaging but of that she would not think counting ‘One two three four’ waiting until the trembling in her hand subsided then spreading the vaginal lips she brought the razor-sharp blade upright against the cervix and into the birth canal even as she pressed down upon it grunting with surprise at the lightning-swift pain as if she had been thinking that the tiny creature in her uterus would feel it and not she. And immediately too a rivulet and then a stream of bright warm blood began to flow wetting her legs, her feet, her tense spread toes…¹⁴²

For Oates, both books are studies of a serial killer’s mind. *Zombie*, however, is based on the life of a real serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Dahmer murdered at least 15 young men, and was sentenced to 15 life terms in prison. He was murdered by another prisoner after having spent only a couple of years behind bars.¹⁴³ Quentin, like Jeffrey Dahmer, is intelligent, studies at university, drinks, has a good relationship with his parents and his grandmother, is on probation, and sees a parole

officer as well as a therapist. Oates shows how easy it is for offenders to convince their therapists and supervisors into believing that they are being open with them and that they are taking their medication. Some scenes depict the police being very close to catching him, but being thwarted by Quentin's lawyers. Oates is articulating the accusation that the people close to such a killer exhibit a certain blindness and lack of concern: the parole officer does not have time to inspect the killer's house; the father smelling the stench of rotting bodies fails to check the premises; the psychotherapist is too quick to believe the stories that the killer tells him. Most of the killer's victims are not missed at all, as they come from disenfranchised groups.

Since Q_P_’s and Kathleen Hennessey’s stories are told from the protagonist’s point of view, the reader is privy to the serial killer’s logic. As such, Oates is challenging the reader to identify with the killer. Everything that Q_P_ does is geared towards one goal: to catch his prey and to avoid exposing himself. By contrast, Kathleen’s mind is not so clear; she is one of Oates’s dreamy-sleepy characters that wakes up considerably late in the course of the narrative. In *Zombie*, the atmosphere of suspense is driven by Q_P_’s focus on “hunting.” In *The Rise Of Life On Earth*, meanwhile, the suspense is less focused: it arises from Kathleen’s feeling of being abused and powerless, and grows with her discovery of power over her patients, resulting in killings. Towards the end of the novella, the tension rises with every step of the preparation for her self-inflicted abortion, and reaches its culmination in the abortion scene. Both thrillers are designed to catch and hold the reader’s attention, to balance identification with the serial killer with identification with the victim, and to “live” in the killer’s claustrophobic mind. In the afterword to a collection of horror stories, *Haunted: Tales of Grotesque*, Oates writes:

One criterion for horror fiction is that we are compelled to read it swiftly, with a rising sense of dread and so total a suspension of ordinary skepticism, we inhabit the material without question and virtually as its protagonist; we can see no way out except to go forward.¹⁴⁴

Patrick Anderson, in turn, argues that over the last few decades, “writers with literary skills and sensibilities began to produce variations on suspense formulas and the thriller began to expand far beyond the just-the-facts-ma’am police procedural.”¹⁴⁵ Thrillers such as *Zombie* and *The Rise Of Life On Earth* certainly offer more than police procedural; they are characterized by a

focus on serial killers, the gothic portrayal of horror scenes, and detailed depiction of the psychological details that allow deeper insights into a killer's mind. Since Oates is genuinely interested in the "irrational mind" of the serial killer, she is also interested in the social circumstances that can directly influence the development of such personalities. Her thrillers, like her parodies of romance and detective stories, rely strongly on the depiction of her characters' social and cultural circumstances, and she often draws upon real life stories for her plots.

Facts, Reality and Parody

As I have shown, over the last two decades Oates has experimented with parody, merging popular and literary fiction, and mixing reality and fiction. Oates's "borrowing" of plots from newspaper articles and television shows is understandable, in light of her desire to be involved in discourses on morality and ethics. Yet, the fact that some of her works have been published while those affected are still emotionally involved with the events portrayed has stirred up emotion and provoked controversy, as in the case of the short story, *Landfill*.¹⁴⁶ Oates believes that an author must be a "perpetual antagonist" and reconsider social values in his or her work, although "a literary principle is not a justification for upsetting anyone, even unintentionally."¹⁴⁷ On the one hand, dealing with real-life events allows the author to be representation-al, and to take a stance within a community and in society at large. On the other hand, writing about topics that are still making national headlines may push ethical boundaries to extremes that are felt to be unacceptable. It is very probable that Oates is driven by a desire to tell her fictional truth about negative developments in American society, and that this has the side-effect of sensationalizing events. For instance, in the case of the death of JonBenét Ramsey (see further below), Oates voiced concern that the criminal investigation had become a form of entertainment in the popular press and on television talk shows, while the legal system was failing to apprehend the guilty parties.

Indeed, one of Oates's most recent controversial narratives, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*, is based on an unresolved murder that occurred on Christmas night in 1996, when the six-year-old beauty pageant star, JonBenét Ramsey, was found dead in the cellar of the family home in Boulder, Colorado. The circumstances surrounding the murder were unclear; family members were included among the suspects, and were only exonerated in 2008.¹⁴⁸ The media accused the police investigation of ineptitude, and suggested that a lot of evidence had been destroyed at the

murder scene. The case still receives a great deal of media attention, books have been written about it, and websites set up. In 1999, Joyce Carol Oates reviewed a number of publications related to the Ramsey case for *The New York Review of Books*.¹⁴⁹

Oates addresses a number of points in her review. First, she expresses her disapproval that very young children are presented to the public in sexualized ways, and thus potentially exposed to abuse. Second, she appeals to the public conscience for ignoring the fact that a child's murder will remain unpunished, that "no decisive legal action is taken." Oates criticizes the police's inability to conduct a proper investigation that involves upper-class suspects:

Except that a child is dead and the lives of numerous other people badly shaken, or ruined, the JonBenét Ramsey case is a comedy of errors. David Lynch or Quentin Tarantino could not have devised a scenario so surreal and bleakly comic: the most inept crime of the century investigated by the most inept police department of the century.¹⁵⁰

Oates emphasizes that in America, there are clearly two different kinds of justice. Or rather, "there is no 'justice'; actual guilt and innocence have become irrelevant, as the focus of dramatic attention shifts from the defendant/criminal onto his prosecutors and, especially if he's rich and notorious, his defense attorneys."¹⁵¹

Third, Oates highlights the actions taken by the family over the course of the investigation. She implies that the family might have had something to do with the girl's murder, but having hired a public relations team, they managed to outmaneuver the police, the press and the judicial system:

At nearly every turn they seem to have outwitted their pursuers. Their intention has been, from their point of view, to broadcast their innocence; others have labeled it 'poisoning' potential jurors. At a time when police in such cities as New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh are routinely accused of acting with excessive force, including gunning down innocent and unarmed citizens, it's enlightening to learn from the Ramseys' example how impotent police really are unless they have arrest warrants; unless, that is, suspects are well-to-do and can retain expert legal counsel.¹⁵²

Then, nine years later (and 12 years after the murder), Oates wrote a novel about the same murder case, which remains unsolved. The novel, which was published in 2008 just prior to the family's exoneration, Oates addresses the same points that she had addressed for *The New York Review of Books*. Now, however, she also questioned the well-being of children who are exploited to fulfill their parents' ambitions, or who become the focus of press attention. Despite the fact that the novel is a work of fiction, its reviews made reference to the Ramseys and the unsolved murder case,¹⁵³ and the book's dust cover indicates that it was "inspired by an unsolved American true crime mystery."¹⁵⁴ Such statements can hardly escape the public's attention, reinforcing the connection between Oates's name and popular fiction and crime stories.

The distance between what Oates presents as fiction and what really happened to the Ramsey family is very small, and perhaps comes dangerously close to being insulting and humiliating, as Sarah Churchwell points out in her review of the novel.¹⁵⁵ It is an indisputable fact that a famous six-year-old girl was murdered in her upper-class family's home. The case received a great deal of media attention, and the person responsible has not yet been apprehended. Using the data about the family and facts from media coverage of the case, Oates created a fictional story, mainly as a means of highlighting the issues that she had discussed in her essay. For some reviewers, she comes painfully close to the Ramsey case in her use of similar names or geographical data. Thus the Ramsey family becomes Rampike, and mother Patsy is depicted as Betsey. The setting moves from an affluent suburb in Boulder, Colorado, to a similar suburb in Fair Hills, New Jersey. The son Burke, Skyler in the novel, is of the same age as his prototype. The murder victim, JonBenét, is cast as Edna Louise (and later called Bliss). She is a skater, not a beauty pageant queen, and Oates shifts the month of her murder from December to January.

Oates brings another infamous name into the narrative, that of O.J. Simpson. *My Sister, My Love* constitutes Oates's second attempt to write about his case (aside from a number of references in other novels, such as *Middle Age*). Previously she had written *Freaky Green Eyes*, a young adult novel, in which she depicts a father, a sports journalist, who murders his wife and her alleged lover. In *My Sister, My Love*, Oates includes the so-called "story of Skyler's first love,"¹⁵⁶ the novella "First Love Farewell," about Skyler's experiences at Hodge Hill School, in which "sons and daughters of disgraced politicians and lawyers, businessmen, lobbyists, bribe-takers and -givers"¹⁵⁷ were studying. In this school, Skyler's girlfriend Heidi Harkness is the "daughter

of a recent celebrity murderer, a former major league baseball player who had been acquitted the previous spring after a lengthy, luridly publicized trial of having murdered his estranged wife, the wife's alleged lover, and the wife's beloved poodles Yin and Yang.”¹⁵⁸

My Sister, My Love is accusatory and sarcastic, a satire on the American upper classes and popular culture. It reads as an indictment of child-raising practices in the United States, or indeed any other country where tabloid culture, celebrity lifestyle and the desire to be famous dictate social mores. Oates casts the parents in a negative light; they pursue their ambitions at the cost of their children's health and well-being. Eventually, Oates reveals that the mother was responsible for the daughter's death and that the father had covered it up, while the son spends ten years feeling guilty about what had happened to his sister.

However, Oates does not adopt realism as her style in the novel, despite what one might expect. *My Sister, My Love* is instead strongly reminiscent of an earlier Oates novel, *Expensive People* (1968). Both novels are set in affluent suburbs, explore relationships between parents and children, and are narrated by “crippled” sons who play minor roles in family life. The fathers are frequently absent, while the mothers are more preoccupied with their own ambitions than with their families. Both narratives feature parents with unrealistic plans for their children: being an academic prodigy or a sports star, or any other popular activity that might bring fame. As in *Expensive People*, the narrator in *My Sister, My Love* is a psychologically unstable young adult (18 and 19 years of age respectively) who needs to write a memoir in order to relate his experiences and those of his family. While *My Sister, My Love* encloses a novella, “First Love Farewell,” *Expensive People* includes a short story, “The Molesters,” which Oates also published separately in a literary magazine. In a sense, *My Sister, My Love* reads like an imitation of *Expensive People*, the difference being that the latter is far less grotesque and accusatory than *My Sister, My Love*. Moreover, in *Expensive People*, Oates deals with fiction, while *My Sister, My Love* is based on a real crime. In addition, the way in which Oates deals with the media – “Tabloid Hell” – in *My Sister, My Love* is new. Judging from the style and contents of the books, I would argue that *My Sister, My Love* is both a parody of *Expensive People*, and a parody of the postmodern novel in general. Oates subverts her realistic story through the ironic and self-reflexive manner of its telling.

The title page of *My Sister, My Love* resembles a photocopy of a manuscript, with suggestions that some notes have been added at a later date, and hand-written sentences represent the process of writing. The reader is given a

prevailingly visual impression, something that is consistent with the intended style of the novel: incomplete and unrevised. The reader then sees that the novel has been dedicated to Bliss ("In Memory of My sister Bliss (1991-1997)", and is faced with the (con)fusion between the author, Joyce Carol Oates, who does not have such a sister; and the narrator, Skyler Rampike, who claims that he did have such a sister. Furthermore, two quotes follow on from the author's disclaimer, one of which is genuine (by Søren Kierkegaard) and another that, as reviewers rightly noticed,¹⁵⁹ is Oates's own construction. Oates paraphrases a quotation from Edgar Allan Poe's¹⁶⁰ essay, "The Philosophy of Composition"; she renames the essay, "The Aesthetics of Composition"; and signs it E. A. Pym. Later, in the novella *First Love Farewell* that is included in the text, she refers to this essay as the subject that is taught in Mr. Dunwoody's class. The name "E. A. Pym" is probably a composite of the names Edgar Allan Poe and his character, Arthur Gordon Pym, from *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Sabotaging such texts in an epigraph has the function in postmodern fiction of reminding "the reader of the narrativity and to assert its factuality and historicity,"¹⁶¹ simply by distorting their accuracy. Instead of directing the reader to the real context, she misleads readers and invites them to question the credibility of the text that they are reading.

This quotation also suggests that Oates is deliberately alluding to Poe in general, and to the history of the publication of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in particular. Having written the novel, Poe presented it to the public as an authentic travel story that had been written by Pym,¹⁶² while Pym was in fact one of the main characters in the narrative. In turn, Oates alludes to and parodies Poe's intentions by presenting Skyler Rampike as the narrator and author of the memoir, and one of its characters. This construction also alludes to and parodies Vladimir Nabokov's, *Pale Fire*, which deals with a confusion of narrators and characters. *Pale Fire* is also the name of a poem which plays a central role in the novel. Its writer, Charles Xavier, appears to be living incognito as Charles Kinbote, the name under which he writes an extensive commentary on the poem. According to Kinbote, the author of the poem, John Shade, was murdered. Different readings present different versions of who is who, and who exists in the imagination of which character, while the whole work is actually a product of Nabokov's imagination.

Like Nabokov's non-linear novel, Skyler Rampike goes back and forth in the narrative of *My Sister, My Love*, repeating himself and making mistakes. He acknowledges to the reader that:

fittingly this document will not be chronological/linear but will follow a pathway of free association organized by an unswerving (if undetectable) interior logic: unliterary, unpretentious, disarmingly crude-amateur, guilt-ridden, appropriate to the ‘survivor’ who abandoned his six-year-old sister to her ‘fate’ sometime in ‘wee hours’ of January 29, 1997, in our home in Fair Hills, New Jersey. Yes I am that Rampike.¹⁶³

In the footnotes, Skyler-the-narrator reveals more of his character, but can the footnotes be trusted? Linda Hutcheon points out that in postmodern fiction, footnotes are used to refer us to “a world outside the novel” and to “refer us explicitly to other texts, other representations first, and to the external world only indirectly through them.”¹⁶⁴ They may then “offer a supplement to the upper text,” but “function as self-reflexive signals to assure the reader as to historical credibility”¹⁶⁵ of the source cited. They are not entirely trustworthy, however, for they “are both inscribed and parodically inverted,” designed to “disrupt our reading.”¹⁶⁶ Hutcheon concludes that “the conventionally presumed authority of the footnote form and content is rendered questionable, if not totally undermined.”¹⁶⁷ The footnotes in *My Sister, My Love* contain a direct address to the reader that consists of the narrator’s self-reflexive comments, indicating his intention to start a dialogue:

The skeptical reader recoils in disbelief: ‘What the hell? A kid of nine, medicated, half-drunk, isn’t capable of such a profound “epiphany,” this is bullshit.’ But I assure you, dear reader, skeptic as you are, that this is exactly how Skyler Rampike felt watching his little sister sign a wrinkled cocktail napkin.¹⁶⁸

Oates then uses the footnotes to reveal Skyler’s true character and to establish his credibility. Soon, however, he calls himself an “unreliable narrator,” meaning that the footnotes also lose their function of establishing “historical credibility,” since they consist of the narrator’s comments and in most cases do not refer to historical sources. Neither, in turn, do the citations. For example, the opening sentence of the second section of chapter one, “dysfunctional families are all alike, ditto survivors,”¹⁶⁹ paraphrases Leo Tolstoy’s phrase, “happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” without indicating the source. Thus Oates starts the narrative with a fusion of real facts and invented facts, only to further exploit this fusion later in the text. There is no consistency in the first- or third

person narrative, although most of the text is related in the first person and the majority of the footnotes are written in the third person. The narrator, Skyler, takes a voyeuristic view of his nine-year-old self, now depicted as a character in the memoir.

In his reflections on writing, the narrator of *Expensive People*, Richard Everett, is more sophisticated and subtle than his parody, Skyler. Everett's style is more refined; he is confident using language and idiomatic expressions, his citations are correct, and he is clearly educated:

In literature we have a few incidents [of child murderers], none of them first-rate: the allusion in a lesser Chaucerian tale of a child warrior, ... the allusion in *Macbeth* to Lady Macbeth ... and Stendhal's exasperating references to a certain irrevocable crimes of Julien's...¹⁷⁰

He is conscientious about style and considers its possibilities:

....there is tension, all right, because I couldn't begin the story by stating: *One morning in January a yellow Cadillac pulled to a curb*. And I couldn't begin the story by stating: *He was an only child*. (Both these statements are quite sensible, by the way, though I could never talk about myself in the third person.)¹⁷¹

Skyler, meanwhile, comments on his style in the footnotes like an amateur for whom it is more important to disclose secrets, and to reveal the “true story,” than to write in a refined way:

Hell, I know. I am wincing, too. Such clumsily executed scenes are painful to read, yet more painful to write. And yet more painful to have lived ... As an amateur writer who has lived a mostly amateur life. I wish that this document contained more elegantly turned passages, as I wish that it contained a more refined *dramatis personae* [sic?] but in confessional documents you must work with what you have.¹⁷²

Skyler experiments with layout, fonts, graphics, italics, bold text, and capital letters; he draws hearts, indents lines and adds bullet points; some chapters consist only of a title, a capitalized line and a footnote, and incomplete

sentences. He invites his audience to answer questionnaires to gain insight into their own characters. All of these devices are meant to compensate for his inadequate verbal skills. For Oates, this is a means of critiquing declining literacy levels in today's digitalized and fragmented world.

My Sister, My Love is a novel that emphasizes and mocks the erosion of boundaries between the literate and the illiterate, fiction and non-fiction. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, "the borders between high art and mass or popular culture and those between discourses of art and the discourses of the world (especially history) are regularly crossed in postmodern theory and practice. But it must be admitted that this crossing is rarely done without considerable border tension."¹⁷³ Oates uses and abuses the tension between fiction and non-fiction, and between literary genres. She mocks the labyrinth-like narrative constructions that invite the reader to check and recheck the facts, and satirizes self-reflexivity and contemplation. By employing techniques such as disrupting chronological and narrative continuity, self-referencing, and adding comments to her writing, she imitates the features of postmodern novels by authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and Paul Auster. The fact that the novel has been written by someone who cannot write suggests nothing other than a parody of the postmodern novel. *My Sister, My Love* is a satire of postmodern fiction, of its contradictions and challenges, in addition to being a satire of the postmodern social condition, which is characterized by rootlessness and the commodification of everything, including religion.

This chapter has examined Oates's appropriation of popular genres – romance, social melodrama, mysteries, detective stories and thrillers – and her attitude to postmodern fiction. I have tried to show how on the one hand, Oates explores these genres and styles, while on the other, she challenges their limits and parodies them. In doing so, she embraces both serious and popular fiction, and blends real-life facts with fiction to create a world of her own. Above all, she stays true to her ideal of the artist as an antagonist, who questions and revises while remaining bonded to his or her community.

Conclusion

In 2003, Oates returned to *A Garden of Earthly Delights* to revise and accentuate the characters that she had conceived in this early novel. It is interesting to note that, far from changing, Oates's vision of American society has only become more emphatic and deeply rooted over the years. She writes that

The trajectory of social ambition and social tragedy dramatized by the Walpoles seems to me as relevant to the twenty-first century as it seemed in the late 1960s, not dated but bitterly enhanced by our current widening disparity between social classes in America. *Haves* and *have-nots* is too crude a formula to describe this great subject, for Swan Walpole discovers, to *have*, and not to *be*, is to have lost one's soul.¹

Having taken it upon herself to portray the social and moral issues affecting her generation, Oates has remained true to this resolution throughout her career. However, she often emphasizes her role as a chronicler; she writes down what she sees, and does not wish to pass judgment or impart a message. In her view, the author is "in the work,"² and every reader will discover his or her own meaning.

The aim of this study was to examine how Joyce Carol Oates reflects American realities in her recent novels. In the process, three clear patterns have emerged. First, Oates constantly reflects on the past, from the post-war period to more recent decades, reexamining not only the cultural constructs of previous generations, but also our current attitudes towards them. Second, Oates takes a critical look at modern American upper classes. Third, she has engaged with a new area, that of celebrity and popular culture. In these latter novels, she is particularly interested in the tension between an individual's authenticity and his or her perception of their "inner needs," and societal pressures that can restrict individual self-expression.

The first four chapters of this study examined how Oates's characters deal with this tension in contexts such as the family, politics, business, upper-class life, popular culture and the media. Analyzing the relationship between failure and success, perfection and imperfection, and the hypocrisy of the middle- and upper classes, Oates tries to find a balance between tradition and

individual freedom, neither of which can be seen as an absolute goal. The last chapter examined the various modes of storytelling that Oates employs in her recent novels, and her appropriation of different forms of genre fiction, such as horror and detective fiction. These are not mere academic exercises or whims; with these novels, Oates pushes the boundaries of genre fiction with elements of parody and satire, breaking the predictability of the plots, and adding extra punch to the stories' impact.

In her recent novels, Oates has focused on the position of women, and the relationship between family life and society more generally. An analysis of her female characters clearly shows that Oates, in the first place, has a tendency to re-envision and reinvestigate past patterns of family life. The narratives that are set in rural and small-town America dispute the popular, idealized picture of postwar family values that has been promoted in neoconservative ideology. Although Oates herself has more sympathy for the 1950s rural American lifestyle than for contemporary suburban life, she does not embrace traditional values without first reconsidering them. In Oates's view, traditional Protestant values, such as stability and strength of character, deserve to be cherished, while she is critical of the strict division of male and female roles within the family unit. Oates exposes the constricting patriarchal patterns that governed and still govern women's lives, the violence that they are subjected to, and the difficulty that some women experience in finding fulfilling and creative lifestyles. In this respect, it is notable that none of her modern female characters become high-flying professionals, such as lawyers or doctors.

The novels that were discussed in the first chapter also show a clear turning-point in Oates's thinking: in her recent novels, Oates envisions more opportunities for women to develop their individuality and personal ambition than in her earlier narratives. The motifs of extreme violence, unprovoked cruelty and severe poverty that were typical of Oates's early fiction are less present in her recent novels. Oates's use of such motifs in her middle-class portrayals serves to remind us that economic reality remains the driving force behind her characters' lives. The scenes of violence against women (and men) that occur in almost every novel are often related to economic deterioration and uncontrollable passions. One can thus deduce that in Oates's view, the combination of upward mobility and spiritual development can function not only to improve women's economic conditions, but also play a character-shaping and liberating role in women's lives.

The comparison made in the first chapter between women from rural settings and those living in affluent suburban towns, suggests that when imagin-

ing a fulfilling life, Oates has a preference for rural landscapes, unity with nature, and a sense of connectedness to the past. Oates does not thereby mean to imply that one can only become a fulfilled woman or mother in a rural setting; rather, she is proposing that alienation from nature and one's community, egocentrism, the pursuit of fame, and socialite lifestyles can destabilize any relationship, both within the family and also in the larger community. Although she devises happy endings for her "rural" novels, she pleads for change: for women to have more freedom in making decisions, and more freedom in pursuing ways to enrich their lives. Oates insists that, while living an ordinary life, the combination of individual freedom, living in harmony with family and society, and feeling part of a larger historical process, can lead to personal fulfillment.

For Oates, the past provides us with a source of information about the present. The past helps us to explain the present, functions as a source of inspiration and knowledge, and allows us to learn from our history. Writing about her generation's past and that of her family, Oates emphasizes the importance of roots, history, and symbols that denote historic events and connect us with previous generations. For Oates, however, it is critical to reexamine the past and expose its romanticized aspects, such as the idealization of the 1950s. Her goal is to reconstruct an image of previous periods, while acknowledging the diversity and complexity of the issues that shaped the past. In one essay she wrote, "For many of us, writing is an intense way of assuaging, though perhaps also stoking, homesickness. We write most avidly to memorialize what is past, what is passing, and will soon vanish from the earth."³

Chapter two situated Oates's criticism of American political and corporate life in the context of the 1990s. In doing so, the chapter examined fundamental characteristics of American society, such as upward mobility, work, and property ownership. I demonstrated that in Oates's view, such characteristics have lost their intrinsic and moral value, becoming nothing but hollowed-out, corrupt "shells." In the middle- and upper classes, upward mobility is treated as a choice between retaining social contact and a life of loneliness; success is ultimately expressed in the never-ending construction of a celebrated, successful image. In Oates's view, work in modern middle-class America has become inseparable from gambling and con-artistry. In turn, property ownership may indicate a person's social status, wealth and success, but in reality, the houses of the upper classes have become places of entrapment, misery and loneliness. It can be concluded that from Oates's perspective, although these characteristics have long been at the core of American

society, having shed their moral value, they have come to symbolize the accumulation of wealth for its own sake and the mindless satisfaction of bodily desires. As such, Oates is particularly critical of the self-enrichment and self-interest displayed by political and corporate élites in America, and this class's rejection of the responsibilities inherent in their powerful positions. The issues discussed in this chapter are especially pertinent in light of events surrounding the current (2008-09) credit crisis, and the underlying mentalities and the profit-seeking, abusive, and sometimes wholly illegal behavior that this financial crisis has revealed.

In chapter three, I examined Oates's understanding of the meaning of life, as lived by contemporary upper-class Americans. In Oates's depiction, middle-aged men are no longer able to find meaning in their work, while their wives and other female characters are no longer able to find meaning in their various social occupations and fundraising activities. As a result, both men and women are conscious of a gaping sense of inner meaninglessness, leading them to feel "dead" and experience devastating boredom. A review of the literature on boredom and the meaning of life suggested that meaninglessness and boredom could be seen as essential elements of our lives. Since we cannot escape them, we would be wise to embrace them. Moreover, periods of the so-called artistic boredom may give birth to creativity, and function as a necessary part of the artistic process. The best remedy for boredom is to stay passionate, to use Joseph Brodsky's words.

Oates has a similar perspective on the phenomenon of boredom. Her work suggests that both boredom and failure, far from being entirely negative phenomena, can aid the creative process. Oates relates the feelings of futility experienced by her characters to traditional understandings of work in contemporary America, typified by the core Protestant work-ethic values of duty, stoicism and wealth accumulation. Only by reflecting on and revising their so-considered duties can an individual gain freedom and make choices. The unquestioning acceptance of traditional values that has characterized old-money families over the generations eventually leads to entrapment. In *Middle Age*, Oates depicts powerful people who, ironically, are powerless when it comes to challenging the social mores of their own class. For Oates, exercising the freedom to choose one's occupation is the most important aspect of working towards a fulfilled life. She seems to particularly favor occupations that are closely connected with the basic realities of life, such as caring for animals or gardening.

An additional important issue for Oates that has significant implications for people's fulfillment is that of the isolation of affluent communities from

the rest of society, achieved either by zoning or by constructing physical barriers in the forms of walls and gates. People in such communities tend to live comfortable, problem-free lives, and are spared any form of challenge. This absence of challenge leads to boredom, which in turn leads to a lack of motivation to develop new ambitions. So, paradoxically, the flawlessness of such environments can eventually lead to the failure of the human spirit, and of the whole notion of living. For Oates, achieving perfection means that no space is left for development and growth; it signifies a personal and artistic dead-end.

Another clear development in Oates's recent novels has been her turn, since the late 1990s, towards portrayals of popular culture. In doing so, Oates approaches celebrity culture as symbolic of the ultimate fragmentation of reality, of our rootless modern existence, and our preference for fake images rather than real things. In narratives such as *Broke Heart Blues* and *Blonde*, Oates deconstructs the image of celebrity life as the ultimate achievement in contemporary American life. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, Oates is increasingly emphasizing the importance of image in those spheres that have traditionally been characterized by, or prized for, a sense of authenticity: corporate life, politics, and student life. She fears that an idealized and distorted version of celebrity culture is increasingly affecting the lives of ordinary people, distracting them and encouraging them to negate their responsibilities in favor of participating in reality television shows. Oates is especially concerned about the fate of children who are turned into commodities by their parents, to be presented to the image-hungry media.

In this sense, Oates's views are similar to those of Neil Postman, who sees the entertainment industry as something that will eventually ruin American society. Oates's Hollywood of the 1950s is dominated by misogyny and hypocrisy, qualities that leave no space for artistic aspirations. Her television producers of the 1990s, meanwhile, capitalize on the death of a young girl in order to make a series of entertaining television shows. A notable feature of these works, in this respect, is that the two major narratives, *Blonde* and *My Sister, My Love*, are based on real-life stories, thereby demonstrating Oates's own very close relationship with contemporary American society.

The last part of this study consisted of an analysis of how Oates deploys different modes of storytelling and genres to great effect in her fiction, allowing her to reach a wider circle of readers. Although Oates experimented a lot in her early career, over the last two decades, she has presented readers with a striking range of forms and styles. Not afraid to be associated with genre fiction, she has written thrillers and melodramas, and used classic

elements of detective and romance fiction in her more complex literary works. The analysis of a number of novels in this chapter suggests that Oates remains closely engaged as a social critic through her blending of fact and fiction, and as a literary critic in her parodies of the postmodern mode of storytelling, labyrinthine narrative constructions, and of her own work. Oates is not afraid to challenge esthetical and ethical boundaries, to question established norms, and to investigate social issues.

In short, over the last decades, Oates has engaged with issues in modern American society to an even greater degree. Her works revise the fundamental American values of the past, and examine their contemporary meanings. While she repeatedly engages with the same themes, with each return, she exposes different aspects of the same topic. Like Joanne Creighton and Kori Binette said of the daughters portrayed in Oates's fiction, "she does not merely repeat the same story with a predictable end; instead she portrays each daughter as a unique product of a variety of cultural, environmental, and psychological factors."⁴ My analysis suggests that Oates remains very closely connected to American cultural realities, codes and values. Time after time, she reconsiders different symbols and representations of American culture, and questions their validity and meaning in different social and professional contexts.

In her study of Oates's novels, Creighton concludes that Oates is a very complex and impressive writer, whose "important place in American literary and intellectual history is assured."⁵ Gavin Cologne-Brookes, meanwhile, finishes his study with the suggestion that Oates should be considered a national novelist, for her work embraces different literary traditions, from realism to postmodernism, and covers a whole range of themes, from history to gender. In Cologne-Brooke's words, "No other contemporary writer has given voice in so sustained or varied a way to multiplicity of concerns that define contemporary American culture."⁶ We should not forget that Oates is not only a relentless critic of American society and values, and a distinguished writer, essayist and reviewer, but also an artist whose work yields easily to other forms of art. More than ten film adaptations have been made of her works, along with opera and song adaptations and numerous theatre productions, not only of her plays, but also of her novels and short stories. Therefore, I would like to suggest that she certainly deserves an important place in American literature and in American culture as a whole. By discussing Oates's recent work and its cultural context, I thereby hope to have contributed to a better understanding of Oates's oeuvre.

Notes

Introduction

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¹⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset, Leo Lowenthal, ed. *Culture and Social Character: The Work of David Riesman Reviewed* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) viii.

¹⁸ Caroline Fraser, “Heart of Darkness,” *The New York Review of Books*, 51.11 (2004).

¹⁹ Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Plume, 1999) 2.

²⁰ Johnson, *Invisible Writer*.

²¹ Fraser, “Heart of Darkness.”

²² Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 22

²³ Joyce Carol Oates, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?” *New York Times*, 29 March 1981.

²⁴ Oates, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?”

²⁵ Jeffrey Smalldon, “End of Story? Joyce Carol Oates Takes Stock As She Approaches 70,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, 6 April 2008 (http://www.columbusdispatch.com/live/content/arts/stories/2008/04/06/oates_long.html?sid=101, accessed on 7 November 2008).

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²⁹ Gavin Cogone Brookes, “Written Interviews and a conversation with Joyce Carol Oates.” *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (2006) 549.

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³⁶ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 32.

³⁷ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 62.

³⁸ Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years* 39.

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⁴⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, *Wild Nights: Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway* (New York: Ecco, 2008) 43-44.

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⁴⁹ Robert Birnbaum, “Jonathan Safran Foer: Author of Everything is Illuminated talks with Robert Birnbaum,” *identitytheory.com: A Literary Website*, sort of (<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum108.php>, accessed on 27 November 2008).

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⁵² Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985, 2006) XX.

⁵³ Brenda Daly, “The Art of Democracy: Photography In the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates/Rosamond Smith,” *Studies in the Novel*, 38-4 (2006) 460.

⁵⁴ Daly, “The Art of Democracy” 460.

Chapter 1

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³ Johnson, *A Barbarous Eden*.

⁴ Johnson, *A Barbarous Eden*.

⁵ Johnson, *A Barbarous Eden*.

⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, *By the North Gate* (New York: Vanguard, 1963) 86.

⁷ Sanford Pinsker, ed., “Joyce Carol Oates and the New Naturalism,” *The Southern Review* 15.1 (1979) 52-63, page 62.

⁸ Pinsker, *Joyce Carol Oates and the New Naturalism* 59.

⁹ Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Penguin, 1999) 405.

¹⁰ Mary Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America: Melancholia and the Mythical 1950s* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 2005) 73.

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¹² Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America* 177.

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¹⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (London: Virago, 2000, 1st ed. 1967) 2.

¹⁵ Oates, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* 27.

¹⁶ In David Riesman’s character typology, persons who are inner-directed have “character types who can manage to live socially without strict and self-

evident tradition-direction.” See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950; New Haven: Yale U. Press: 1961).

¹⁷ “Nuclear Family,” *Wikipedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_family, accessed on 12 January 2009).

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¹⁹ Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules. Searching for Self-fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (Toronto: Bantam, 1982).

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²⁵ Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Plume, 1999) 308.

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²⁷ Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America* 99.

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³⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* (New York: Ecco, 2007) 291.

³¹ Oates, *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 34.

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³³ Joyce Carol Oates, *Mother, Missing* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003) 76.

³⁴ Oates, *Mother, Missing* 89.

³⁵ Oates, *Mother, Missing* 339.

³⁶ Oates, *Mother, Missing* 339.

³⁷ Oates, *Mother, Missing* 339.

³⁸ Jeffrey Hart, *When The Going Was Good: American Life in the Fifties* (New York: Crown Publ., 1982) 9.

³⁹ Hart, *When The Going Was Good* 10.

⁴⁰ Adelaide van Reeth, *Encyclopedie van de Mythologie* (Baarn: Tirion, 1996). This encyclopaedia states that while originally, Cybele was the goddess of a mountain (Kaz Dag in north-west Turkey), later she became the ‘queen’ of nature and fertility. In her cult, a central place belonged to her partner, Attis, who, according to one of the myths, was also her son. The celebration of her cult was popular because it was related to death, resurrection and immortality. She was worshipped under different names, including

Kybele, Rhea, and Ma. In Rome, she was also called Magna Mater. Before writing *We Were The Mulvaneys*, in 1979, Oates published a novel, *Cybele*, and a short story, “Magna Mater,” in *The Goddess and Other Women* 1974. I also discuss *Cybele* in chapter 4 of this study.

⁴¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* (New York: Plume, 1997) 185.

⁴² Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 185.

⁴³ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 12.

⁴⁴ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 7; italics by Oates.

⁴⁵ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 17.

⁴⁶ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 3.

⁴⁷ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 14.

⁴⁸ Yankelevich, *New Rules* 112.

⁴⁹ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 185.

⁵⁰ Nussbaum, *Sex and the Social Justice* 149.

⁵¹ Nussbaum, *Sex and the Social Justice* 11.

⁵² David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 15.

⁵³ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 177; italics by Oates.

⁵⁴ Christopher Lasch, *Women and the Common Life* (New York: Norton, 1997) 160.

⁵⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) 80.

⁵⁶ Oates, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* 100.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 40.

⁵⁸ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1996).

⁵⁹ See Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* 30-31.

⁶⁰ Andrew J. Dunar, *America in the Fifties* (Syracuse: Syracuse U. Press, 2006) 195

⁶¹ Dunar *America in the Fifties* 195.

⁶² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) quoted in Dunar, *America in the Fifties*, 196

⁶³ Oates, *The Falls* 22, italics by Oates.

⁶⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) 111, italics by Oates.

⁶⁵ Oates, *Blonde* 109.

⁶⁶ Oates, *Blonde* 109.

⁶⁷ Joyce Carol Oates *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967; London: Virago, 2000) 147.

⁶⁸ Oates, *Blonde* 254.

⁶⁹ The “woman’s sphere” originates from the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, when men started to work outside the family in the “men’s sphere,” the world of business, while women were responsible for home economy. This division, says Bellah, led to a rise in the status of

women; they were no longer simply subordinate, but were “separate but equal” in their own sphere. The “woman’s sphere” was imagined to be one of peace, concord, love and devotion, in contrast to the selfishness and immorality characteristic of “the world,” the men’s sphere. See Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* 86-87.

⁷⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *Wonderland* (1971; New York: Vanguard, 1972) 353.

⁷¹ Oates, *Wonderland* 355.

⁷² Oates, *Wonderland* 414.

⁷³ Oates, *Wonderland* 366.

⁷⁴ Oates, *Wonderland* 440.

⁷⁵ Brenda Daly, *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson: U. Press of Mississippi, 1996) 46.

⁷⁶ Daly, *Lavish Self-Divisions* 181.

⁷⁷ Oates, *The Falls* 172.

⁷⁸ Oates, *The Falls* 22.

⁷⁹ Oates, *The Falls* 397.

⁸⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *The Falls* 29, italics by Oates.

⁸¹ Oates, *The Falls* 34, italics by Oates.

⁸² “Conversation with Joyce Carol Oates,” interview, *Bookbrowse* (http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=1054, accessed on 15 January 2008).

⁸³ Dunar, *America in the Fifties* 202.

⁸⁴ Oates, *The Falls* 300, italics by Oates.

⁸⁵ Oates, *The Falls* 298.

⁸⁶ Oates, *The Falls* 312.

⁸⁷ Oates, *The Falls* 310.

⁸⁸ Oates, *The Falls* 43.

⁸⁹ Oates, *The Falls* 171.

⁹⁰ Oates, *The Falls* 226.

⁹¹ Robert Birnbaum, *Birnbaum v. Joyce Carol Oates*, interview, *The Morning News*, 3 February 2005 (http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/birnbaum_v_joyce_carol_oates.php, accessed on 7 November 2008).

⁹² Oates, *The Falls* 226.

⁹³ Oates, *The Falls* 215.

⁹⁴ Oates, *The Falls* 227.

⁹⁵ Sharon Dean “History and Representation in *The Falls*,” *Studies in the Novel* 38.4 (2006) 525.

⁹⁶ Oates, *The Falls*, unnumbered page before title page.

⁹⁷ Oates, *The Falls*, unnumbered page before title page.

⁹⁸ Oates, *The Falls* 40.

⁹⁹ Oates, *The Falls* 176.

¹⁰⁰ Oates, *The Falls* 176.

¹⁰¹ Oates, *The Falls* 176.

¹⁰² Oates, *The Falls* 216.

¹⁰³ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 76.

¹⁰⁴ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 84.

¹⁰⁵ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 84.

¹⁰⁶ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 86.

¹⁰⁷ Melinda Bargreen, "Author of 'The Gravedigger's Daughter' produces like the devil," *The Seattle Times*, 1 June 2007

(http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/books/2003729539_oates03.html, accessed 25 January 2009).

¹⁰⁸ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 550.

¹⁰⁹ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 553.

¹¹⁰ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 534.

¹¹¹ Sarah Crown "The Grandmother of Invention," interview, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2007 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sep/10/fiction.sarahcrown>, accessed on 27 January 2009).

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¹¹³ Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* 186.

¹¹⁴ Andrew J. Dunar, *America in the Fifties* (Syracuse: Syracuse U. Press, 2006) 175.

¹¹⁵ Dunar, *America in the Fifties* 175.

¹¹⁶ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 15.

¹¹⁷ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 24.

¹¹⁸ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 33.

¹¹⁹ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 44.

¹²⁰ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 45.

¹²¹ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* 22.

¹²² A personality disorder characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a tendency to overvalue one's actual accomplishments, an exhibitionistic need for attention and admiration, a preoccupation with fantasies of success, wealth, power, esteem or ideal love, and inappropriate emotional reactions to the criticisms of others. This symptom-based definition is preferred to that found under the older term narcissistic neurosis. See Arthur S. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

¹²³ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, London: Norton, 1991, 1st ed 1979) 33.

¹²⁴ Susan Bordo "Material Girl: The Effacement of Postmodern Culture," *An Anthology of Literary Theory*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michel Ryan, (London: Blackwell 1998) 1109-1110.

¹²⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *What I Lived For* (London: Picador, 1994) 441.

¹²⁶ Oates, *What I Lived For* 433, italics by Oates.

¹²⁷ Oates, *What I Lived For* 179.

¹²⁸ Oates, *What I Lived For* 434.

¹²⁹ Oates, *Expensive People* 110.

¹³⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (New York: Ecco, 2008) 65.

¹³¹ Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 132.

¹³² Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 122-123.

¹³³ Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 395.

¹³⁴ Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 92.

¹³⁵ Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 476.

¹³⁶ Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 477.

¹³⁷ Oates, *My Sister, My Love* 475.

¹³⁸ Oates, *Expensive People* (1968; London: Virago, 1998) 300.

¹³⁹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) 19.

¹⁴⁰ see Joyce Carol Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature* (New York: Vanguard, 1974).

¹⁴¹ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 5.

¹⁴² Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 4.

¹⁴³ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 436.

¹⁴⁴ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 438

¹⁴⁵ Oates, *Mother, Missing* 77.

¹⁴⁶ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 121.

¹⁴⁷ Witney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Culture* 207.

¹⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press) 147.

¹⁴⁹ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 20.

¹⁵⁰ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 403.

¹⁵¹ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 405.

¹⁵² Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* 5.

¹⁵³ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 3.

¹⁵⁴ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* 153.

¹⁵⁵ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 437.

¹⁵⁶ Oates, *We Were The Mulvaneys* 434.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 20.

Chapter 2

¹ Harold Bloom, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987). Bloom refers to the question raised in the epigraph to *them* from Webster's *The White Devil*, "because we are poor / Shall we be vicious." Bloom thinks that for Oates, this phrase implies "because we are rich / Shall we be vicious."

² Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer. A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Plume, 1999) 389.

³ "Writing as a Natural Reaction," *Time*, 10 October 1969 (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,839080,00.html>, accessed on 12 February 2009).

⁴ Joyce Carol Oates "The Picture of Dorian Gray," *Contraries. Essays*. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 13.

⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) 55.

⁶ Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* 79.

⁷ Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* 79.

⁸ Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* 79.

⁹ Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* 71.

¹⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. (New York: Norton, 1991, first ed. 1979) 7.

¹¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier. The Suburbanization of the United States*. (New York: 1985) 4.

¹² Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*. (New York: Random House, 1981) 231.

¹³ Yankelovich, *New Rules* 95.

¹⁴ Yankelovich, *New Rules* 8.

¹⁵ Yankelovich, *New Rules* 111-112.

¹⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, *What I Lived For* (London: Picador, 1994) 119.

¹⁷ Oates, *What I Lived For* 400.

¹⁸ Oates, *What I Lived For* 48.

¹⁹ IRS, The Internal Revenue Service, the US government agency responsible for tax collection and tax law enforcement.

²⁰ Oates, *What I Lived For* 125-126. A limited partner receives return on investment and has limited liability with respects to debts incurred by the firm.

²¹ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 389.

²² Oates, *What I Lived For* 365.

²³ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Unwin Books, 1970, first ed. 1925) 77.

²⁴ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* 77.

²⁵ Richard Daniel Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkely: Lehmann, 1998) 286.

²⁶ Joyce Carol Oates *My Heart Laid Bare* (New York: Plume, 1999) 100.

²⁷ Oates, *What I Lived For* 144.

²⁸ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 389.

²⁹ Jon C. Teaford, *City and Suburb. The political Fragmentation of Metropolitan America, 1850-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1979).

³⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* 265-272.

³¹ Teaford, *City and Suburb* 2.

³² Seymour Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York, London: Norton, 1996) 249.

³³ Lipset, *American Exceptionalism* 249.

³⁴ Oates, *What I Lived For* 423.

³⁵ Oates, *What I Lived For* 119, 481.

³⁶ Oates, *What I Lived For* 119.

³⁷ Oates, *What I Lived For* 119.

³⁸ Oates, *What I Lived For* 119.

³⁹ Oates, *What I Lived For* 522.

⁴⁰ Oates, *What I Lived For* 522.

⁴¹ Oates, *What I Lived For* 341.

⁴² Oates, *What I Lived For* 171-172.

⁴³ Oates, *What I Lived For* 342.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 98.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 98.

⁴⁶ With the short story collection *Marriages and Infidelities* Oates sought to demonstrate her relationship with the writers of the past, such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Anton Chekhov, and Henry James. In her view, she would not have become the writer she is without their work. She demonstrated her “marriage” to Joyce by reworking his short story, “The Dead,” from the short story collection, “The Dubliners.” The “infidelities” consist of transgressions in the form and the theme, and the shift of the emphasis from male to female characters.

⁴⁷ Declan Kiberd, introduction, James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 2000) [page] xvi.

⁴⁸ Oates, *What I Lived For* 343.

⁴⁹ Oates, *What I Lived For* 100-118.

⁵⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, “The Death Throes of Romanticism,” *New Heaven New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature* (London: Gollancz, 1976) 111-141 and Joyce Carol Oates, “The Myth of the Isolated Artist,” *Psychology Today* 6 (May 1973) 74-75.

⁵¹ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*.

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⁶⁶ Oates, *My Heart Laid Bare* 2.

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¹²⁷ Boorstin 36.

¹²⁸ Oates, *Blonde* 58.

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¹⁵⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *Broke Heart Blues* (New York: Dutton, 1999) 294.

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Chapter 5

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Conclusion

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Summary

This dissertation presents a thematic analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's recent novels. Joyce Carol Oates (1938) is a contemporary American writer, reviewer and essayist, as well as being the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. She has written more than 50 novels, and more than 30 short story collections, novellas, dramas, volumes of poetry and essays. This study focuses on the novels that she has written about the middle- and upper classes since 1990. The goal of the study is to examine the ways in which Joyce Carol Oates's recent novels represent the reality of contemporary America. A thematic approach is taken to Oates's novels, providing cultural, sociological and historical contexts for her work. In particular, this study draws on sociological and cultural studies of American society in the second half of the 20th century, and its attitudes relating to family values, middle-class values, and the American Dream.

The introduction provides biographical details, summarizes the critical reception of Oates's work, offers an overview of the main topics of her oeuvre, and elaborates on Oates's attitude towards her predecessors' works. Throughout her career, Oates has frequently returned to the themes of violence, personality, and social struggle, no matter which mode of storytelling that she might be employing. As she readily admits, she has drawn on many writers over her career, with the influence of D.H. Lawrence, Edgar Allan Poe and James Joyce being most evident. The introduction also outlines the study and discusses its methodology.

The first chapter focuses on the interaction between traditional and contemporary ways of life in rural and small-town America. This theme is explored through the prism of Oates's portrayals of women in *Mother, Missing, We Were The Mulvanneys, The Falls, The Gravedigger's Daughter, What I Lived For and My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*. The women that Oates portrays in these novels fall into three groups: subordinate wives, liberated women and hedonist socialite types. In her portrayals of the first two groups, Oates employs motifs from her early work, including those relating to the settings of the novels, the strong presence of natural powers and rural landscapes, poverty, and extreme violence, all of which eventually serve as character-shaping forces for her 'social climbers.' Like some of the women in her early novels, some of Oates's more

recent female characters manage to escape their deprived existences by reinventing themselves and manipulating others. The third group consists of cultural stereotypes, characters that Oates uses to satirize the decadence of middle- and upper-class suburbs.

Portraying families in her recent novels, Oates questions the validity of the idealized picture of the postwar nuclear family, and the assumed prosperity and good life enjoyed by the postwar generation. The analysis of the novels reveals that on the one hand, Oates looks upon rural and small-town American family life with nostalgia; while on the other, she is critical of the disadvantages and entrapment suffered by women who are subject to the strict norms of family life. Oates finds contemporary America to be lacking in strength of character, stability, reliability and moral decency, qualities that are often associated with the Protestant world-view, while simultaneously criticizing the limitations that this same Protestant ethic imposes on her characters. The novels discussed in this chapter show that Oates values the simple life and man's relationship with the natural world, and reveals her insistence on revising and memorializing the past.

Chapter 2 is devoted to Oates's vision of success and failure as concepts central to the American Dream. This section of the study argues that Oates views the drive to succeed in American corporate and political culture as both extreme and treacherous. The analysis of the novel, *What I Lived For*, demonstrates that in Oates's view, the fundamental characteristics of American society – including work, upward mobility and property ownership – have lost their intrinsic and moral value. Work has become inseparable from gambling and con-artistry, upward mobility has had the effect of detaching individuals from trusted social networks, and people's homes have turned into places of misery and emotional devastation. Success itself has become a never-ending construction of the image of success. For Oates, failure is morally preferable to success; while failure stimulates growth and improvement, success releases people from their commitments and responsibilities.

This chapter analyses the satiric portrayal of city life in the context of the social, urban and economic developments that occurred in America during the second half of the 20th century. It suggests that Oates uses the setting of the action, Union City, as a metaphor for contemporary America. Thus the scenes of destruction and social injustice that Oates paints in this city function as a warning against the negative effects of short-term investment and political corruption.

Chapter 3 examines the concept of boredom and feelings of meaninglessness in the upper classes, as portrayed in *Middle Age: A Romance*. In this

social satire, Oates explores what is left of the meaning of life when people have achieved the highest possible social status, and satisfied their material needs. Drawing on philosophical discussions of boredom, this chapter examines how Oates's characters experience pre-retirement, how they contemplate the meaning of their lives, and how they attempt to find fulfillment. The study finds that Oates traces the causes of boredom and feelings of meaningless to a combination of factors, namely social and racial exclusivity, isolation, traditional upper-class mentalities, Protestant ethics, and the suppression of individuality. Although the feeling that one's existence is meaningless may make life a misery, the novel implies that boredom, when combined with a rediscovery of authenticity, may also serve as a form of stimulation. In her narrating of the characters' fates, Oates is suggesting that expressing one's individuality, reconnecting with society at large, and becoming involved in social issues may serve as remedies for the feeling of having died within.

Oates's engagement with popular and celebrity culture is discussed in Chapter 4, which is concerned with Oates's novel, *Blonde*, her fictional biography of Marilyn Monroe; a novel based on an unresolved murder, *My Sister My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*; and *Broke Heart Blues*. Blending fact and fiction, and taking little distance from real events, Oates's critique reveals celebrity culture to be shallow and corrupt. She envisions actresses as victims at the hands of producers and directors, and portrays television program makers and tabloid publishers that ignore ethical issues in their race for fat profits. Oates also chides audiences and fans for their immaturity and appetite for sensationalism. As this chapter shows, Oates is concerned about the gradual penetration of celebrity lifestyles into ordinary people's lives. To her mind, a culture that is based on entertainment will eventually turn against individuals, destroying their sense of reality and morality, and causing their personalities to fragment.

The chapter discusses how the American character has changed over the decades, from the ideal 'industrialist' type of the early 20th century to the contemporary focus on public image. It then further examines the relationship between an image that is created for commercial purposes and public consumption, and the person behind the image. Oates is concerned that when the person behind the image comes to fully identify with the image, s/he will lose touch with himself/herself and with reality. Audiences are frequently unaware of the nature of the real person, and demand the creation of a myth based on an image, not the referent. The chapter suggests that Oates approaches celebrity culture as symbolic of the ultimate fragmentation of reality

in contemporary society: the rejection of memory and the past, and the celebration of absolute freedom that is associated with rootlessness. The effacement of traditionally celebrated qualities, such as reliability and integrity, is central to Oates's portrayals of characters that are trapped in celebrity and socialite lifestyles.

The last part of this study offers an overview of the various literary genres that Oates has employed in her recent novels, and discusses how she has adopted these genres in her work. The chapter shows how Oates challenges the limits of both historical and modern romance, thriller and detective genres, by blending fact and fiction, and by embracing popular fiction and parodying the postmodern novel. Next to that, she employs gothic and melodramatic devices, and offers very graphic descriptions of violent or sexual acts. Oates's novels are often emotional and melodramatic, which has led to the perception that she balances between being a literary writer and a popular writer. The chapter attempts to show that the demarcation line between highbrow and lowbrow is blurred in contemporary fiction, and that Oates is one example of a writer who embraces both. She writes about general social issues, while making her work accessible to society at large.

Furthermore, Oates uses parody in much of her work. In doing so, she tends not to mock the text or genre that is being parodied; rather, she imitates it, keeps it at a respectable distance, and questions, revises and challenges it. Oates combines parody with social satire, a tool that she uses to expose social constructions and limitations, and the lack of morality and ethics in society. In doing so, Oates not only parodies the work of other writers, but also parodies her own work. Above all, she stays true to her ideal of the artist as an antagonist, who questions and reexamines the world around them, while remaining bonded to a community.

Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift biedt een thematische analyse van de late romans van Joyce Carol Oates. Joyce Carol Oates (1938) is een hedendaagse Amerikaanse auteur, critica, essayiste en bovendien *Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities* aan Princeton University. Van haar hand verschenen meer dan 50 romans, ruim 30 verzamelingen korte verhalen, novellen, toneelstukken, poëziebundels en essays. Deze studie concentreert zich op haar romans over de Amerikaanse midden- en bovenklasse, geschreven na 1990. Het doel van deze studie is te onderzoeken op welke manier de latere romans van Oates de hedendaagse Amerikaanse realiteit weergeven. De besprekking van de romans is gebaseerd op een thematische analyse, waarbij culturele, sociologische en historische contexten worden betrokken. De studie steunt met name op sociologische en cultuurkritische studies van de Amerikaanse samenleving in de tweede helft van de 20^e eeuw en de opvattingen rond begrippen als gezin, de middenklasse en de Amerikaanse droom.

De Introductie presenteert biografische details, geeft een doorsnee van de kritiek op het werk van Oates en een overzicht van de hoofdthema's van haar oeuvre en positioneert Oates ten opzichte van haar voorgangers. Oates heeft zich gedurende heel haar carrière gebogen over thema's als geweld, persoonlijkheid en sociale problemen, onafhankelijk van de gebezigeerde literaire vorm. Ze erkent de invloed van veel andere schrijvers, maar de invloed van D.H. Lawrence, Edgar Allan Poe en James Joyce zijn het duidelijkst aanwezig. Tenslotte bevat de Introductie een overzicht van het onderzoek en wordt de methodologie toegelicht.

In het eerste hoofdstuk komt de interactie aan bod tussen de traditionele en hedendaagse levensstijlen op het Amerikaanse platteland en in de kleine stad. De focus ligt op de portrettering van vrouwen in *Mother, Missing, We Were The Mulvaneys, The Falls, The Gravedigger's Daughter, What I Lived For* en *My Sister My Love: An Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*. De hier voorgestelde vrouwen vallen uiteen in drie categorieën: onderdanige echtgenotes, vrijgevochten vrouwen en hedonistische, mondaine types. In haar beschrijvingen van de eerste twee categorieën gebruikt Oates motieven van haar vroege werk, zoals de situering, een sterke aanwezigheid van natuurlijke krachten en ruige landschappen, armoede en extreem geweld, die uiteindelijk dienen als de karaktervormende krachten voor haar sociale klimmers. Zoals

in haar vroege verhalen slagen sommige vrouwen in de latere romans erin te ontsnappen aan de ontberingen van hun bestaan door een herwaardering van zichzelf en manipulatie van anderen. De derde categorie vertegenwoordigt culturele stereotypen, aan de hand waarvan een satire van de decadentie van de midden- en bovenklasse wordt gecreëerd.

De familieportretten in de latere romans stellen de geldigheid aan de orde van het geïdealiseerde beeld van het naoorlogse gezin, en de welvaart en het welzijn die de naoorlogse generatie ten deel is gevallen. De analyse van de romans toont dat Oates het leven van het Amerikaanse gezin van het platte-land en de kleine stad met nostalgie beziet, maar ook de nadelen en beperkingen kritiseert die vrouwen ervaren onder de strikte normen van het gezinsleven. Oates mist in het huidige Amerika het sterke karakter, de stabiliteit, betrouwbaarheid en morele rechtschapenheid die vaak in verband worden gebracht met protestantse waarden, hoewel ze tegelijk de beperkingen bekritiseert die dezelfde protestantse ethiek oplegt aan haar hoofdpersonen. De in dit hoofdstuk besproken romans laten zien dat Oates waardering heeft voor het eenvoudige leven, de verhouding tot de natuurlijke omgeving, en dat zij aandringt op revisie en herdenking van het verleden.

Hoofdstuk 2 is gewijd aan Oates' visie op succes en mislukking als centrale begrippen van de Amerikaanse droom. De belangrijkste vaststelling in dit deel van de studie is dat Oates de drang tot slagen in de wereld van onderneming en politiek beschouwt als extreem en gebaseerd op misleiding. De analyse van de roman *What I Lived For* toont dat in Oates' opvatting fundamentele kenmerken van de Amerikaanse samenleving zoals werk, *upward mobility* en privébezit hun intrinsieke en morele waarden hebben verloren. Werk is verweven geraakt met gokken en bedrog, *upward mobility* isoleert individuen van hun vertrouwde sociale netwerken en in de privé-omgeving heersen disharmonie en emotionele verwaarlozing. Succes wordt tot een eindeloze constructie van de schijn van succes. Mislukking is voor Oates moreel acceptabeler dan succes, want het stimuleert groei en verbetering, terwijl succes mensen loskoppelt van hun levensdoelen en verantwoordelijkheden.

In dit hoofdstuk wordt de satirische weergave geanalyseerd van het leven in de grote stad in de context van sociale, stedelijke en economische ontwikkelingen in de tweede helft van de 20^e eeuw in de Verenigde Staten. De analyse suggereert dat Union City, de plaats van actie, een metafoor is voor het hedendaagse Amerika. Het door Oates geschetste beeld van destructie en sociaal onrecht moeten ons waarschuwen voor de negatieve effecten van korte-termijninvestering en politieke corruptie.

Hoofdstuk 3 exploreert het begrip verveling in een beschouwing van het gevoel van betekenislosheid in de karakters van *Middle Age: A Romance*. In deze sociale satire evalueert Oates de betekenis van het leven zodra de hoogste sociale status is bereikt en alle materiële behoeften zijn bevredigd. Met behulp van inzichten uit de filosofie omtrent het verschijnsel verveling wordt in dit hoofdstuk onderzocht hoe de hoofdpersonen het ervaren dat ze niet meer hoeven werken, hoe ze de betekenis van het leven zien en proberen een gevoel van voldoening over hun leven te vinden. De bevinding is dat Oates de oorzaken van verveling en afwezigheid van betekenis relateert aan een combinatie van sociale en raciale uitsluiting, isolatie, traditionele attitudes van de bovenklasse, de protestantse ethiek en de onderdrukking van individualiteit. Hoewel het betekenisloze bestaan mensen ongelukkig maakt, laat de roman ook zien dat verveling in combinatie met de herontdekking van authenticiteit een stimulerende uitwerking kan hebben. Door de lotgevallen van haar hoofdfiguren suggereert Oates dat de expressie van individualiteit en herstel van de betrokkenheid met de samenleving kan werken als een remedie tegen de innerlijke levenloosheid.

In Hoofdstuk 4 komt de betrokkenheid van Oates voor het voetlicht met de wereld van de populaire cultuur en haar idolen. Het hoofdstuk concentreert zich op de roman *Blonde*, een fictionele biografie van Marilyn Monroe, de roman *My Sister My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*, gebaseerd op een onopgeloste moord op een kindsterretje, en de roman *Broke Heart Blues*. In een verwoving van fictie en realiteit, en weinig afstand nemend van ware gebeurtenissen, bekritiseert Oates de *celebrity*-cultuur als oppervlakkig en corrupt, en portretteert zij actrices als slachtoffers in de handen van producers en regisseurs en de makers van televisieprogramma's en sensatiebladen als mensen zonder moraal en gedreven door geldzucht.

Ook het publiek en de fans van de beroemdigheden gaan niet vrijuit om hun gebrek aan volwassenheid en sensatiezucht. Dit hoofdstuk toont Oates' bezorgdheid omtrent de geleidelijke invasie van de *celebrity*-levensstijl in de levens van gewone mensen. In haar optiek keert de ontspanningscultuur zich uiteindelijk tegen het individu, waarbij de zin voor realiteit en morele waarden verloren gaan en de persoonlijkheid gefragmenteerd raakt. De discussie richt zich op de verandering in het Amerikaanse karakter, van het type uit het begin van de industrialisatie tot het op de uiterlijke persoonlijkheid gerichte type, en vervolgens op het *image* gecreëerd voor het publiek en de commercie en de persoon erachter. Oates wijst erop dat als de persoon achter het *image* zich hier volledig mee identificeert, het contact met zichzelf en de

realiteit wordt verloren. Het publiek kent de echte persoon niet en eisen de creatie van een mythe op basis van het *image*, niet van de referent.

Oates benadert de *celebrity*-cultuur als symbolisch voor de uiteindelijke fragmentatie van de hedendaagse realiteit, de verwerping van persoonlijk geheugen en historie en de verheerlijking van de vrijheid die voortkomt uit ontworteling. De ontwaarding van traditionele kwaliteiten zoals betrouwbaarheid en integriteit speelt een centrale rol in Oates' weergave van de figuren die opgenomen zijn in de *life style* van beroemdheden en *beau monde*.

Het laatste deel van deze studie onderzoekt de literaire genres die Oates heeft beoefend in haar latere boeken en bespreekt hoe ze deze genres in haar werk heeft geïntegreerd. Getoond wordt hoe Oates de beperkingen van de historische en moderne romantische roman, de thriller en de detectiveroman, overschrijdt en hoe zij feiten en fictie combineert, waarbij de stijl van de populaire roman wordt gevuld en de postmoderne roman wordt geparodieerd. Zij gebruikt ook *gothic* en melodramatische elementen en geeft soms zeer onverbloemde beschrijvingen van sexuele en gewelddadige handelingen. Aangezien Oates' romans veel emotionaliteit en melodrama bevatten, wordt zij vaak beschouwd als balancerend tussen literair en populair schrijverschap. De scheiding tussen "hoge" literaire en "lage" populaire fictie is tegenwoordig niet zo strikt meer en Oates is een schrijver die beide aanhangt. Zij beschrijft een breed gamma aan aspecten van de samenleving en maakt haar werk toegankelijk voor een brede uitsnede van de samenleving.

In veel van haar werk beoefent Oates de parodie. Meestal is hierbij het genre of een bepaald werk niet het onderwerp van spot; het genre of werk wordt geïmiteerd en vanaf een respectabele afstand geëxploreerd, gereviseerd en uitgedaagd. Haar parodie wordt gecombineerd met sociale satire gericht op sociale omstandigheden, onmogelijkheden en gebrek aan moraliteit. Oates parodieert niet alleen het werk van anderen, maar ook haar eigen werk. Bovenal blijft zij trouw aan haar ideaal van de artiest als antagonist, die uitdaagt en deconstrueert, maar ook sterk geworteld blijft in de wereld om haar heen.

Curriculum Vitae

Asta Balčiūnaitė was born on 16 November 1966 in Pasvaliečiai, Lithuania. She completed her studies at Pabiržė Secondary School in 1985, and in 1986 enrolled at Vilnius University to read English Language and Literature. In 1991, she graduated from Vilnius University in Romance-Germanic Philology, qualifying as a philologist and teacher of English language and literature. In 1991, she started to teach English at M. K. Čiurlionis Secondary School in Vilnius, and in 1992, at the Faculty of Philology at Vilnius University. She emigrated to the Netherlands in 1993. She returned to teaching English in 1998, and between 1998 and 2001 she worked at Fioretti College in Lisse, and at Scala College and Groene Hart Lyceum in Alphen aan den Rijn. Since 2001, she has been working for the International Business and Management Studies Department at INHolland University, as a Lecturer in Business English, Business Ethics, Culture and Intercultural Communication.

Asta Balčiūnaitė is geboren op 16 november 1966 in Pasvaliečiai, Litouwen. In 1985 behaalde ze het diploma van de middelbare school te Pabiržė. In 1986 ging ze Engelse taal en letterkunde studeren aan de universiteit van Vilnius, alwaar ze in 1991 afstudeerde op Romaans-Germaanse taal- en literatuurwetenschap en de graad verkreeg van taalkundige en lerares Engelse taal en literatuur. Vanaf 1991 werkte ze als docent Engels aan de M. K. Čiurlionis middelbare school in Vilnius en in 1992 aan de faculteit voor taal- en letterkunde aan de universiteit van Vilnius. In 1993 verhuisde ze naar Nederland. In 1998 nam ze het docentschap Engels weer op en werkte ze tot 2001 in het Fioretti College in Lisse, en het Scala College en het Groene Hart Lyceum in Alphen aan den Rijn. Sinds 2001 werkt ze aan Hogeschool INHolland, afdeling International Business and Management Studies, als docent Business English, Business Ethics, Culture en Intercultural Communication.

