How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again Study Guide

How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again by Joyce Carol Oates

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"How I Contemplated the World From the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again" was first published in magazine form in 1969 and then collected in her 1970 volume of short stories called *The Wheel of Love*. Its sarcastic rendering of upper-middle-class suburban life is not only an accurate critique of that aspect of American life, it is also a true rendering of the adolescent world view that rings as true today as it did when the story was written.

The story's experimental form seemed lifeless to some early critics, but has proven to have given the story literary staying power. The full title, "Notes for an Essay for an English Class at Baldwin Country Day School; Poking Around in Debris; Disgust and Curiosity; A Revelation of the Meaning of Life; A Happy Ending . . . ," invites readers to compare the prediction for a happy ending with the story the narrator tells at the end. Given her gift for sarcasm, is she telling the truth when she claims to "love everything" once she's returned to the safety, if sterile, of her parents' large suburban home? In the case of "*How I Contemplated*," ambiguity and incompleteness in the narrative add to rather than detract from the story's richness.

Author Biography

Joyce Carol Oates was born in Erie County in western New York in 1938. Her parents worked hard throughout the great depression to support her and her two younger siblings, her father at the tool and dye shop and her mother keeping house. Although her working class Catholic beginnings could hardly predict the literary heights she would attain later in life, she was always a serious and highachieving child and made the most of the educational opportunities that she was given.

Her early education was uneven at best. After attending a one-room schoolhouse, and junior high, in Lockport, New York, she finally found a school that had what she needed when she began riding a bus everyday to a high school outside of Buffalo. After graduation, she enrolled at Syracuse University on a scholarship and began a lifelong engagement with books and writing. By all measures she was an extraordinary student and graduated Phi Beta Kappa and first in the class of 1960. The next year she entered the University of Wisconsin at Madison to begin the graduate work to set her on the path to becoming an academic. Within a year she had met and married fellow graduate student in English, Raymond Smith, to whom she is still married. She earned her M.A. in 1961 and moved to Beaumont, Texas where her new husband had gotten his first faculty appointment. She was enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Rice University when she had an experience, the story goes, that changed the course of her life.

While doing research in the Rice library, she ran across a copy of *Best American Short Stories* and found one of her own stories mentioned in it. At that moment she decided to become a professional writer. Though she has held teaching positions throughout her career, Oates kept her pledge to make writing her main focus. For the past thirty or more years, she had been one of America's most prolific and significant writers. Her output is staggering: from 1963 to 1998 she has published thirtyeight novels, twenty-four volumes of short stories, fourteen books of poetry, nine works of non-fiction, and twenty-one plays.

Oates lives in suburban New Jersey and is on the faculty of Princeton University. Her husband runs a small publishing house, Ontario Review Press, that the two of them founded years earlier. Many critics and interviewers have noted the differences and similarities between her placid and stable life and the world she creates in her fiction. On the one hand she has always been able to capture the details and nuances of the American suburban landscape, and her academic satires are clearly the work of a keen inside observer. On the other hand, her depictions of violence and brutality lurking beneath suburbia's placid surface have shocked and disturbed some readers. Oates addressed these objections directly in an essay in the *New York Times Book Review* by explaining that the question about why she would include such violence in her writing "is always ignorant." She goes on to explain that "Since it is commonly understood that serious writers, as opposed to entertainers or propagandists, take for their natural subject the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods, it is always an insulting question; and it is always sexist. The serious writer, after all, bears witness."

Oates continues her amazing production, despite her claim to "spend an inordinate time doing nothing," as she said to interviewer Robert Phillips. Her recent non-fiction book on the sport of boxing, first published in 1987 and then expanded in a new edition in 1994, has garnered a lot of attention and praise. In August 1998 she published an autobiographical essay about her own visit to a New Jersey house of corrections (as a guest on a tour), called "After Amnesia."

Plot Summary

In a partial and disorganized set of notes for an essay for her English class at a private school, a sixteenyear- old girl tells the story of a set of events that lead her to a house of correction and to an opportunity to contemplate her life and begin over again. Though the details are not presented in chronological order, the full story does emerge upon careful reading.

At fifteen years old, the narrator, the child of wealthy parents in one of Detroit's most affluent suburbs, escalates her habits of stealing and vandalizing by shoplifting a pair of gloves from an "excellent" department store and gets caught. Her parents react by hushing everything up and smoothing it over, and she never gets whatever attention she was craving. Her mother just wants to know why "if she wanted gloves, why didn't you say so?". The narrator thinks, "I wanted to steal, but not to buy," but she doesn't tell her mother. Consequently, her next act of rebellion is even more drastic. She walks out of school and runs away to downtown Detroit, where she is so out of place that she doesn't even know what a pawn shop is for. Alone, vulnerable, and still desperate for the affection her chilly parents deny her, she is easy prey for Clarita, a prostitute, and her pimp, Simon, a drug addict. After an unspecified period of prostitution and abuse, the narrator is eventually picked up by the police and turned over to a juvenile facility. There she clings stubbornly to her rebellious posture and refuses to give information that would allow her to be released to her parents. Acting tough, "she says to the matron *I 'm not talking about anything*, not because anyone warned her not to talk, but because she will not talk." She tries to fit in with the other girls there and seems to take some pride and pleasure in thinking she belonged. She is sadly mistaken, however, as she discovers one night when two of the girls corner her in the bathroom and beat her savagely, just because she is rich and white and privileged. After a stay in the hospital she returns to her Bloomfield Hills "traditional-contemporary home" with her parents. By the time she composes these notes, she has returned to school at Baldwin Country Day and is in the care of a psychiatrist. She seems to be working out her desire toward selfexpression and her quest for identity through her writing and her therapy rather than through desperate and self-destructive behaviors like the ones that landed her first in Simon's bed and then in the house of corrections.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The narrator begins this story by describing a scene in which she finds herself walking through Braden's, an "excellent" department store. She is fifteen years of age and a student at Baldwin Country Day School. The year is 1968.

As the narrator walks through the store, she pauses near the costume jewelry counter to look at the rings, earrings and necklaces. Although they are not expensive, the girl decides they are ugly, and so she moves on to the glove counter. Looking at the gloves, which she decides are likewise ugly, she looks around at the women shoppers; none of them seem to be in a hurry. A short time later, the girl finds herself at home being questioned by her mother. Apparently, the girl had been caught shoplifting a pair of gloves and was released to her parents because her father, a doctor, was an acquaintance of the storeowner's physician.

An unspecified period of time passes. One afternoon, the girl is out shopping with her mother but is not interested in the things her mother is showing her. The mother, who, according to the narrator belongs to so many clubs and organizations that she seems to be in "perpetual," can't understand why her daughter seems so disinterested. The girl explains to the reader that she has an urge to shoplift again, but she chooses not to share this fact with her mother.

Several weeks later, the girl is at a bus stop. She has walked out of school and has decided to take a bus to Detroit. As she walks down the street, she passes a pawnshop and wonders what purpose a shop like that serves. She eventually meets Clarita, a prostitute and drug addict who is likely between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. Clarita wonders why the narrator has chosen to leave her clean, comfortable home and live on the street, but nonetheless, takes her to Simon, her pimp. Simon is also a drug addict.

The story briefly returns to the narrator's Sioux Drive neighborhood in the Detroit suburbs. She tells us that there seems to be no weather in her neighborhood; the change of seasons passes without much fanfare. She describes the various homes that line the streets of this neighborhood and provides the names and occupations of those who live in them. When she describes her own home, she tells us that in addition to the stacks of magazines that are regularly delivered there, there recently was a letter from her school informing her parents that she has not been working to her potential. This thought leads her to mention her brother, who is enrolled in a preparatory school in Maine. She tells us that when her brother was ten years of age, he stole trick-or-treat candy from some six year-old children. The narrator seems to have followed his example; in addition to the incident in Braden's department store, she also has been caught shoplifting a magazine from a local pharmacy and on separate occasions, a roll

of Life Savers and a package of Tums. In contrast to her own neighborhood, she describes the weather in Detroit as constantly changing.

The narrator then describes the series of events that eventually caused her to land in jail. She returns us to the afternoon she shoplifted the gloves from Braden's department store. Exhilarated at having nearly completed her mission, she tells us that her heart is pumping and her eyes are glowing with excitement as she makes her way to the store's exit. Before she can safely reach the door, however, she is stopped by a store detective. Meanwhile, her father is attending a medical convention in Los Angeles.

The narrator finds herself at the Detroit apartment that Clarita shares with Simon. The apartment is located over a restaurant in a bad neighborhood. Clarita tells her that the torn wallpaper is the result of a pill binge she recently had. As the narrator takes in the unfamiliar sights, she realizes that if Clarita were to come to her neighborhood, she would feel just as uncomfortable. She wonders what Clarita's life would have been like if she hadn't left home at the age of thirteen. The narrator recalls that when she was thirteen, she was going to friends' slumber parties. While at Clarita's, the narrator is seduced by Simon, an experience she says she would gladly submit to again and again. Simon introduces her to intravenous drug use, and on one morning, even forces her to give him an injection with a needle she knows is dirty. She is terrified of the needles, partially because they remind her of her father. She remains at this apartment for two weeks before she is arrested. She wonders if her father was at home worrying about her when she was being taken into custody.

After having been taken into custody, the narrator, now sixteen years old, wonders if Simon is the reason why she is in jail. She vows not to tell the authorities about Simon, even at the risk of not being able to go home again. She remains steadfast in her convictions until one night when she is cornered in the bathroom by two other female inmates and brutally beaten.

The narrator recovers in the hospital before being taken home by her father. As they make the trip from Detroit to their suburban home, she is almost surprised by how clean everything looks. When she finally enters the house, she breaks down in tears and vows never to leave again. She still does not admit that Simon or any of the other men she was with had hurt her.

A short time later, the narrator has returned to school and is attempting to collect her thoughts by composing the series of notes that make up this story. She says the words keep coming and she is finding it difficult to stop writing. Twice a week, she visits her therapist, Dr. Coronet. Sitting once again in her pink bedroom, her thoughts turn to Simon, and she wonders how he would react to being in her home. She remembers her first sexual encounter with him and how she felt like she had a new life afterward. Despite this, however, she also thinks it was Simon who called the police.

The narrator reads in the newspaper that Raymond Forrest, the owner of Braden's department store, has died. She wishes she could thank him for not pressing charges against her for that long ago shoplifting incident.

As the story ends, the narrator sees her home in a new light and is thankful for all that she has.

Analysis

Joyce Carol Oates' short story "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again" is actually a series of notes written by the narrator as part of a school essay assignment. Because the notes are not organized chronologically, however, the story is at times difficult to follow and understand.

This story is primarily a tale of a young girl's journey toward self-discovery. Aside from the facts provided in her notes, we know little about her. What we do know is that she is one of two children, that her father is a doctor, and the family is financially secure. We also come to understand quite early in the story that her parents are very wrapped up in their own lives and seem to have little time for their children. We see signs of this in the narrator's description of her mother as a woman whose many club memberships and affiliations leave her in a state of perpetual motion. Further, her father seems to be quite aloof and preoccupied with his medical practice. It is also telling that, while the narrator still lives at home, her brother has been sent to a school in Maine; the narrator probably spends quite a bit of time alone. Although she does not specifically say so, we assume that her brother has been away for quite some time, for she admits that she remembers him "unclearly." Further, given the fact that her brother began stealing from others at the age of ten, we must consider the possibility that her brother is not in an "excellent preparatory" school, but rather in some sort of reform school. This possibility is further supported by the narrator's account of the neighbors' questions in Section V, which include "Where is your son anyway?" The fact that the neighbors do not know precisely where the boy is indicates that perhaps the family is trying to hide something. This is consistent with their reaction when the narrator is caught shoplifting; they are able to quietly handle the matter through their own network of friends and business connections. Another example comes later when the narrator returns home from jail, and her father provides the assurance that they are "going to forget all about this."

The girl sees herself as hopelessly resigned to the same type of life her parents lead. Her description of their neighborhood and their home tells us that she is somewhat disenchanted with the orderly nature of everything that surrounds her. It is clear that her parents have little time for her and that she is simply craving some attention. Her statement that "I wanted to steal but not to buy" is indicative of this; by stealing the gloves, she is daring herself to be caught which, in turn, will force her parents to pay at least some attention to her. Later, she wonders if her father was thinking about her the day she was apprehended by the police.

What's more difficult to understand, however, is her decision to run away from home. While there certainly is something that allures many young people to the city, we know almost instantly that the narrator will be far out of her element there. Yet, it is clear that she seems to like the excitement and the raw energy of Detroit. One of the best examples of this comes in her discussion regarding the differences in the weather

between the two places; in suburban Bloomfield Hills, there is no weather, while in Detroit there always is. Even so, it is obvious that the narrator is fairly naïve, as evidenced by her lack of understanding about the purpose of pawnshops. Further, given the fact that she is forced into prostitution during the two weeks she spends with Clarita and Simon, it would seem that once she saw what life was like outside the protective confines of the suburbs, she would want to return home. This does not happen, though; rather, she is defiant in her refusal to cooperate with the authorities, and so her time in jail is prolonged. It isn't until she is brutally beaten by two other inmates that she finally decides it is time to go home.

The narrator seems to answer this question when she wonders during Part VIII, "Is Simon all the difference?" It would seem that he is; the disgust she must have felt by being reduced to prostitution and injecting him with dirty needles seems to have been tempered by the fact that he provided at least some degree of physical intimacy. After she is apprehended and sent to jail, and even in her first days at home, she thinks longingly of Simon and their intimacy, though she never admits this to her parents. In spite of this, though, at the end of the story it appears that she has found some level of peace and is ready to accept her life the way it is.

Characters

Clarita

A woman of indeterminate age (between twenty and thirty-five), she is an addict and a prostitute. She has "an odor of tobacco about her," and has "unwashed skin, gritty toes, hair long and falling into strands, not recently washed." She has been living on the streets since she was about thirteen years old.

Dr. Coronet

Isabelle Coronet is the psychiatrist that the narrator's parents send her to twice a week after her return from the house of corrections. The narrator describes her as "queenly," but surprisingly "normal for a woman with an I.Q. of 180 and many advanced degrees."

Dolly

A "white girl of maybe fifteen," Dolly is one of the two girls in the house of correction who beat the narrator in the bathroom.

Father

The narrator's father, whose name she does not provide, is a successful physician, a member of all the right clubs, a "player of squash and golf." He is a prominent member of the community of Bloom- field Hills and is able to use his social connections to smooth over his children's difficulties with the authorities, but he seems to be unable to show them the love and attention they need.

Mr. Forest

Though "not handsome," Mr. Forest, the English teacher, is described by the narrator as "sweet and rodentlike." It's for his English class at Baldwin Country Day School that these "notes for an essay" are being written.

Raymond Forrest

Raymond Forrest is the owner of the "excellent" department store from which the narrator steals the gloves. After she returns home from the hospital and the house of correction, she reads that his father has died of a heart attack and feels an impulse to send a sympathy note.

Mother

Like the father, the mother goes unnamed throughout the story. Also like the narrator's father, the mother belongs to all the right clubs. She attends lectures and art openings and drives a "Lincoln, long and black" like all the other wealthy matrons on Sioux Drive. Physically, she is always stylishly and perfectly dressed, and has "hair like blown-up gold and finer than gold, hair and fingers and body of inestimable grace."

Narrator

Only fifteen years old when she runs away and ends up in the house of correction, the narrator, who never gives her name, is sixteen when she tries to describe her experiences in notes for an essay for her English class. She lives in her parents' large and comfortable suburban home in the suburbs of Detroit, but her rebellious and self-destructive impulses lead her to shoplifting, prostitution, and ultimately the house of correction. She is ambivalent about her affluent background and describes her parents and all of Bloomfield Hills with scathing sarcasm. Nevertheless, her experiences with Simon and the beating she suffers at the house of correction sent her fleeing back to the protection and comfort of her parents' wealth and privilege. She doesn't provide many details about her own physical appearance, except that she wears her "hair loose and long and straight in suburban teen-age style, 1968."

Princess

As the narrator describes her, Princess is "a Negro girl of eighteen." She is "shrewd and silent" and the narrator is fascinated by her. At first she seems to take an interest in protecting the narrator, but later she is one of the two girls who corner and beat her.

Simon

Simon is the drug addict and pimp who seduces and uses the narrator after Clarita brings her to him. He is "said to have come from a "home not much different" from the narrator's, but he has descended completely into the junkie's life of desperation and crime. Despite how badly he treats her, she craves his touch and affection. Even a year later, she confesses that she would go back to him. She also believes that Simon is the one who saved her by telling the authorities that she was a runaway.

Themes

Love

Love is the engine that drives all of the girl's behavior in "How I Contemplated." She may be misguided, self-destructive, and immature, but the narrator's actions all derive from her desire to be loved. Despite their generosity, the girl's parents seem unable to give her the attention and unguarded affection that she craves. She describes her mother as icy, distant, and artfully constructed and her father as powerful, distracted, and unavailable. As we learn through several references in the story, the narrator's older brother, away at college, engages in the same desperate attention-getting behaviors.

In the narrator's eyes, the mother possesses an other-wordly charm and poise that she feels she can neither live up to nor puncture. Her mother is "a lady . . . self-conscious and unreal." She has "hair like blown-up gold and finer than gold, hair and fingers and body of inestimable grace." She is, above all, too busy and too self-absorbed to pay attention when her daughter is caught stealing from the "excellent" store. The mother's awkward and ineffective way of showing affection for her daughter is to buy her things in the hope that she will transform herself from an awkward, sullen teenager to a polished artifact like herself. The narrator recalls shopping with her mother, listening to her urging "why don't you want this, try this on, take this with you to the fitting room, take this also, what's wrong with you, what can I do for you, why are you so strange . . .?" The narrator wants to tell her mother that she "wanted to steal but not to buy," but decides not to.

The narrator's father is described not so much in terms of his appearance (like the mother is), but rather in terms of what he does; he is defined by his actions. The narrator's father's reaction to problems is to fix them. He handles his daughter's shoplifting episode in the same clinical, pragmatic manner that he uses to treat patients. He gets in touch with the store owner and makes the problem go away. He is completely blind to the fact that his daughter's behavior is a cry for his attention, not his expertise. The narrator recalls poignantly that her father is out of town at a medical convention when she was arrested in the department store. She also wonders, "where he was when Clarita put her hand on my arm, that wintry dark sulphurous day in Detroit." It remains unclear at the conclusion of the story whether her father will ever show her the love she wants, but at least he drives her home and holds her while she sobs in his arms.

The narrator's most desperate act in her search for love and affection is clearly her liaison with Simon and Clarita. Young and confused, the narrator seeks in Simon the physical affection that is missing in the relationships with her reserved and distant parents. What she finds instead is abusive sex and drugs and prostitution. On some level, however, Simon does fulfill some need for her. Asking herself a year later "Would I go back to Simon again? Would I lie down with him in all that filth and craziness?", she has to answer, "Over and over again." Ironically, Simon does make one genuine gesture of affection toward the narrator. By turning her in to the authorities, as she suspects he

has, he helps her by doing the very thing that both of her cold and overprotective parents had failed to do.

Class and Race Conflict

The contrast between Sioux Drive and Detroit on which the story depends points to a deep and troubling divide between white suburbia and the minority-inhabited inner city. The circumstances and inequities that created and sustain this division form the backdrop of the story (see below). The narrator's beliefs and behaviors also express her awareness of and ambivalence toward the racial and social conflict that simmers just beneath the surface.

The narrator's disdain for the affluent and protected world she and her parents live in is obvious in her scathing and sarcastic descriptions of life on Sioux Drive. She lists the number of rooms and architectural features of the houses in her neighborhood, on streets patrolled by "a private police force . . . in unmarked cars." On a Saturday night, the watch out for "residents who are streaming in and out of houses, going to and from parties, a thousand parties." Life on Sioux drive is so self-contained, so insular, she writes, that "when spring comes, its winds blow nothing to Sioux Drive, no odors of hollyhocks or forsythia, nothing Sioux Drive doesn't already possess." Like many teenagers, the narrator rebels against the lifestyle and values of her parents. In 1968, however, her rejection of her parents' way of life has a political dimension as well. She longs to be identified with the other world, Sioux Drive's opposite, Detroit and to be accepted by its inhabitants in order to take sides against her parents. This flawed reasoning leads her first to Simon's false arrest and then to her stubborn posturing in the house of correction. Finally, she is forced to confront the shallowness and pointlessness of her position when she is beaten up by Princess and Dolly who "vent all the hatred of a thousand silent Detroit winters on her body." After the beating, the narrator rushed back to the safety of Sioux Drive, where there are "sugar doughnuts for breakfast," and where "sunlight breaks in movieland patches on the roof of our traditional contemporary home." The injustices and tensions between Detroit and Sioux Drive, between black and white, remain unchanged.

Style

Fragmentary Structure

Even many years after the story's publication, the structure of "How I Contemplated" is still striking and somewhat unsettling to readers. The experimental form Oates uses is fragmentary and full of gaps. Instead of writing the story of an affluent young girl's temporary descent into a life on the streets and in a house of corrections, she gives readers only the girl's own notes for an essay that she may or may not ever write.

What appears to be an orderly outline in twelve sections is really a random and partial arrangement of information recollected a year after the events. In the words of critic Sue Simpson Park, the sections are "repetitive, disjointed, and dispersive . . . indicative of the state of mind of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, confused, questioning, attempting to make sense of the senseless, to impose order upon the chaos." Although the complete title removes any doubt the reader may have about whether the story has a "happy ending," (she is writing a paper for a private school and has declared that she began her life over again), readers still have to piece together the narrative and read between the lines. One of the most significant gaps appears in the section titled "People & Circumstances Contributing to This Delinquency." Under this heading is only the word, "nothing," which suggests to the reader not that there are no contributing factors, but that the young narrator cannot see them or doesn't want to talk about them. In other words, the absence of reasons prompts readers to speculate and to supply reasons of their own to explain the girl's behavior.

Narration

The sixteen-year-old girl who composes these notes for an essay is what is known as an unreliable narrator. She's the only one who tells the story, but the version she offers is limited and possibly altered by her narrow point of view. The narrator's unreliability takes several forms. First, she is only sixteen and thus has the adolescent's limited and selfcentered view of the world. In addition, only a year has passed since the events and she has not had sufficient time to gain perspective on what has happened. In fact, it seems like these notes for the essay represent a preliminary attempt (other than her visits to the psychiatrist) to organize her experience into a coherent pattern. Second, narrative features like blank spaces for names, series of questions ("A pretty girl? An ugly girl?") and missing details cast doubt on her credibility. These missing details are especially noticeable because on other occasions she proves herself capable of remarkable candor and keen observation. For example, she's willing to admit to the other petty crimes she committed before getting caught shoplifting and she's able to render a nuanced and vibrant portrait of suburban life, complete with such vivid details as the car heavy enough " to split a squirrel's body in two equal parts."

The device of the unreliable narrator enhances the story's effect. It would be unreasonable and unrealistic to expect a sixteen-year-old to render a complete and objective account of such a traumatic set of events. The sketchy, uncertain and sometime evasive narrative structure is typical of an adolescent's (especially a troubled one's) world view and contributes to the story's authenticity and power. Finally, the narrator's unreliability makes the openended and ambiguous ending possible. It's impossible to be certain if she is being sincere when she claims that she will "never leave home," and that she is "in love with everything here."

Historical Context

Urban Decay

The late 1960s and early 1970s in America was a period marked by huge and permanent economic and demographic changes. Particularly hard hit by these sweeping changes were many of the country's large industrial cities. Detroit became synonymous with urban decay and what soon came to be known as "white flight." As the narrator describes it, Detroit is "a large famous city that is a symbol for large famous American cities."

The trends had begun much earlier. In the years immediately following the end of World War II, veterans and their families enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and the high birth rate now known as the baby boom. As a consequence these families began to leave the inner cities for newly created suburbs and housing developments. This exodus from what had been thriving mixed-use neighborhoods in large cities set off a chain reaction that reached a crisis in the late 1960s and that continues to reverberate today. As families with at least modest means abandon urban neighborhoods, only those too poor to move remain. The poorer residents are unable to support the surrounding businesses and they in turn must move outward to the suburbs to be closer to their customers. Thus, the inner city loses the tax base that commercial property provides, further depleting the resources and degrading the services for the remaining residents. Public schools struggle to meet children's needs and to attract qualified teachers. Naturally, major employers soon find the suburbs more attractive and abandon the city's core as well. One of the most insidious aspects of this demographic shift is the racial segregation that it causes. The population that moves out to the suburbs is primarily white, while those that stay in the city are primarily people of color. Thus the cycle of poverty and lack of opportunity is reinforced and unequal and segregated school systems grow up within miles of each other.

Racial Tension and Violence

Not surprisingly, the demographic configurations and the economic and social disparities involved of major United States cities resulted in escalating tensions between the races. In the summers of 1967 and 1968 race riots erupted in major cities across the country. In several instances, the National Guard was called upon to restore order. These riots were sparked by a number of causes and found ample kindling in the deteriorating and minority- dominated inner cities. The civil rights movement in the south had awakened black radicalism in northern cities as well, and black power movements such as the Black Panthers gained considerable popular support among minorities and inspired fear and terror in most white people. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the spring of 1968 initiated widespread protest, some of which became violent. In the summer of 1967 forty-three people were killed in race riots in the streets

of Detroit. The images of this kind of violence further deterred white people from living or shopping in—or even driving through—the inner cities.

Women's Lib

The women's movement of the 1960s sought to liberate the suburban housewife. Almost exclusively a white, middle-class movement, women's lib, as this phase of feminism was known, exposed the myth of the happy consumer housewife and implored women to seek fulfillment in other areas of their lives. Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 and the best-seller book of 1964, was the manifesto. In the words of *New Yorker* writer Daphne Merkin in a recent review of Freidan's biography, the book addressed "an amorphous malaise that afflicted college-educated American women, who smothered their children with attention, had unrealistic expectations of their husbands, and then sought to assuage their sense of quiet desperation by downing pills or having joyless extramarital affairs." Of course, many housewives and mothers resisted the radicalizing temptations and stuck firmly to the ideals they had inherited from their mothers. In the language of the movement, those who did so did not want to raise their consciousness and confront their dissatisfactions with their traditional, if comfortable, lives. One group, however, who would have found the rhetoric of women's lib impossible to ignore, is the daughters of these women. Young women rebelled against their mothers' examples, unsure of what they would become, but certain never to fall into the confinement of the unfulfilled housewife.

Critical Overview

When *The Wheel of Love* was published in 1970, Joyce Carol Oates was already an established writer of fiction and poetry. What was still open to debate was whether she was a serious "literary" writer or just a popular one. As she has often pointed out in interviews, this argument is based on the sexist premise that such a prolific *female* writer must have aspired to popularity instead of art. The stories in *Wheel of Love* continued to divide critical opinion, but in the decades since, several of them, including "How I Contemplated," have taken their place among the best of American short fiction.

Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Richard Gilman noted that in some of the stories Oates created "a verbal excitement, a sense of language used not for the expression of previously attained insights or perceptions but for new imaginative reality." Reviewer James A. Avant of the *Library Journal* singled out "How I Contemplated" as one of the stories that demonstrated Oates's "striking expansions of the limits of fiction." Avant also goes on to concede that "One must really go ahead and call her, at the outrageous age of 32, a great writer." On the other hand, Gilman also concludes that Oates's stories are full of "a great deal of 'expressive' rumination about feeling [which] is accompanied by very little feeling itself." Similarly, critic R. E. Long wrote in the *Saturday Review* that the book is "full of cleverness and nimble invention, but it lacks the sense of a deep involvement with life."

Oates, who has written scores of stories for magazines, said in an interview with Robert Phillips for the *Paris Review*, that if she's "serious about a story," she'll "preserve it in book form." Otherwise she "intends it to be forgotten." Since the early reviews of *The Wheel of Love*, some of the stories in the collection, including "How I Contemplated," in the collection have become staples of American literature anthologies. Although somewhat over-shadowed by another story about adolescence in the volume, "Where are your Going, Where Have You Been?", "How I Contemplated" has continued to invite critical readings due to its innovative form and its portrayal of adolescent subjectivity.

Critical responses to the stories in *Wheel of Love* are typical of reactions to Oates work throughout her long and amazingly prolific career. In the first decades of her career she was often dismissed as just a "woman" writer, not a serious (male) writer. At the same time, however, she faced harsh criticism for writing about violent subjects that were considered off limits to female writers. Ironically, feminist critics who began the project in the 1970s of reconsidering and resuscitating American women writers never really gave Oates the attention she deserved. This has to do with Oates long-standing refusal to be identified as (just) a woman writer. In the words of noted feminist scholar and fellow Princeton professor Elaine Showalter, "feminist critics have sometimes taken Oates's insistence that the imagination has no gender as a denial of her social identity as a woman writer, . . . Oates's sense of herself as what she calls a '(woman) writer' has intensified during the 1980s. In the last two decades, Showalter claims, Oates has added a new dimension to her writing, "an exchange with . . . [a] complex female literary heritage."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton teaches American literature and writing classes at the University of Texas. She writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay she explains how "How I Contemplated . . ." is a subversion of the classic coming- of-age story.

In Mark Twain's classic American novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the protagonist, young Huck, is last seen preparing to "light out for the territories." This story of Huck, poised on the brink of manhood, prepared to test his character and forge his identity on the frontier has become a master narrative for the American coming-of-age plot. Oates's "How I Contemplated" employs the elements of the coming-of-age story, but does so in an ironic, subversive fashion. At the heart of Oates's story is a female protagonist whose "adventures" represent regression rather than progress and whose experiences will not arrange themselves into the coherent pattern that the genre requires.

In the American coming-of-age tale, the hero— usually male—must leave the familiar landscape and civilizing influences of city or town life in order to test himself against nature. Even if he doesn't plan to light out for the territories permanently, like Huck, he must make at least a temporary excursion into a hostile or indifferent nature. In "How I Contemplated", however, Oates's female protagonist heads in what appears to be the opposite direction. In Oates's subversive use of the coming-of-age conventions, the city takes the place of the wilderness. The girl leaves behind the lush, green lawns of Bloomfield Hills and Baldwin Country Day School and encounters the city as "wilderness." Ironically, the civilized territory she leaves behind carries an Indian name, Sioux Drive. To her the city's topography is alien, and its inhabitants predatory and sinister. The narrator describes Detroit as a place beset by hazards and warnings: "small warnings of frost, soot warnings, traffic warnings, hazardous lake conditions for small craft and swimmers, restless Negro gangs, restless cloud formations, restless temperatures aching to fall out the very bottom of the thermometer or shoot up over the top and boil everything over in red mercury." In comparison, on Sioux Drive, "There is no weather." These "territories" are no place to try to find yourself. As Clarita says to the narrator, "I never can figure out why girls like you bum around down here. What are you looking for anyway?"

What the narrator is looking for, like all protagonists in coming-of-age stories, is her self. What she finds instead is the wreckage of someone else who has tried to make the same pilgrimage, Simon, "who is said to have come from a home not much different" from her own on Sioux Drive. Simon is the subversive form of the mentor figure that is common to coming-of-age narratives. He had been down the same path before and is capable of acting as her guide, but in Oates's dark version of the genre he offers the very opposite of safe passage. He even acknowledges his role as failed guide when he says, "Once I was Huckleberry Finn, . . . but now I am Roderick Usher." By using the literary analogy to describe his decline and fall, Simon assures the narrator that they do come from the same world of good schools and good families. But the specifics of the

comparison itself, spell out how far he has fallen from his original ambitions. Huck escapes an abusive father and overcomes all manner of obstacles, without losing his moral bearings, on the way to independence and manhood somewhere on the frontier (the "territories"). Roderick Usher (from Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Fall of the House of Usher"), on the other hand, is born into wealth and privilege, but descends into madness, addiction, and depravity and becomes so fearful and frail that he cannot leave the house. Whereas Huck's romanticism propels him outward and upward, Roderick's sends him inward and downward. Simon's search for identity and the frontier have become a primitive struggle just to survive. But the narrator remains powerfully attracted to her wayward mentor, and in probably the only heroic gesture he's capable of, Simon saves her by turning her in, ironically sending her back to the safety of the "Indian territory" on Sioux Drive.

Another characteristic of coming-of-age narratives is the epiphany, or overwhelming moment of realization. Although many features of "How I Contemplated" lead readers to believe that the narrator is poised and ready for an epiphany, Oates leaves the matter very much in doubt. Even the short title implies that the narrator has experienced a powerful moment of self-realization, contemplation leading to a decision. The long title is even more explicit, promising to deliver "A Revelation of the Meaning of Life" and "A Happy Ending." By advertising these dramatic elements in the title, Oates is trying to call attention to the artificiality of the genre, pointing out how in real life our experiences do not conform so neatly to dramatic structures. The story's experimental notebook form also underscores this point as the narrator appears to layout all the elements she has learned belong in a story, and then struggles—unsuccessfully— to arrange her experiences into those categories.

Nevertheless, "How I Contemplated" does contain an ironic version of the moment of profound awareness found in classic narratives in the genre. The narrator experiences an epiphany, but it is a false one that leaves her with more questions and blank spaces than she had before. The false epiphany occurs "that night in the lavatory when everything was changed." Notice the passive construction in that sentence and how it relieves her from any responsibility or agency. She does not bring about change, nor does she acknowledge experiencing any essential change herself. Instead, it's everything the lavatory that changes everything is that she is badly beaten by two of the other girls in detention. Turning points in coming-of-age narratives usually demand that protagonists act, that they imprint themselves on their circumstances, that they do something heroic. In this case, however, the narrator is robbed of all control and is viciously acted upon; she is the victim rather than the hero of her circumstances. Despite this inversion of the conventions of the coming-of-age story, however, the narrator in "How I Contemplated" does have the opportunity to use her experience as victim of assault to learn something. In other words, genuine self-revelation is available to her. But it appears that she's not capable of such self-reflection. Writing about "That Night" after nearly a year of twiceweekly visits to her psychiatrist later she still exclaims, "Why is she beaten up? Why do they pound her, why such hatred?" She doesn't have the courage to contemplate her identity in terms that would come close to explaining why Princess and Star would want revenge on her. She turns away from the revelation —painful though it is&mdashthat the beating offers her.

Because the narrator rejects, or is not prepared for, the lessons that her experiences in "the wilderness" have to offer her, she is destined to return unchanged to the safety of "civilization. By contrast, Huck, at the end of Twain's novel, has completely outgrown the possibility of "civilized" life with his Aunt Sally and knows he must seek challenges and opportunities on the frontier. Oates's narrator, however, returns to the insulating environment of her parents' house and swears that "never will she reconcile four o'clock in the morning in Detroit with eight o'clock breakfasts in Bloomfield Hills." Whatever dissatisfaction, restlessness, or desire drove her to Detroit and into Simon's arms has evaporated or is repressed." *I will never leave home, this is my home, I love everything here, I am in love with everything here*," she says again and again.

If the narrator's breathless affirmations in the story's final section (titled "EVENTS") are any indication, then her journey has been as much a regression as a coming-of-age. If her objective had been to escape her parents' suffocating protectiveness, then she has absolutely failed. Like a child, she "burst[s] into tears and hysteria" and is "convulsed in Father's arms." The house appears to her as "like a doll's house." Readers no doubt share her joy at a safe return from such self destructive behavior, but wonder if this is the "happy ending" they have been promised. Although it is possible to interpret her emotional return home as the beginning of her ability to accept herself and her parents' love. Oates's ending is ambivalent. The narrator describes herself in the last section as "saddened and converted." It makes perfect sense that she is saddened given what she has endured, but "converted" is more difficult to interpret. She may mean that she now prefers to see the world the way her parents do, satisfied to live their comfortable lives pretending that unpleasantness and injustice do not exist. She may also be suggesting that her weeks with Simon, whom she still fears and desires, have changed her permanently in ways that she has not revealed in these notes. She herself seems unsure, wondering as she sees her reflection distorted in the toaster, "is that my face?".

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Daly contends that the characters in Oates's writings (and therefore the author's imagination) do not transcend gender conventions.

When Joyce Carol Oates tells us that "most novelists divide themselves up lavishly in their novels," she implies that a writer's imagination enables her to transcend socially determined gender categories. Nevertheless, as I shall show, Oates's early fiction reveals a pattern of authorial self-division that conforms to gender conventions: her male characters, such as Richard Everett in *Expensive People* and Jules Wendall in *them*, assume the right to define themselves, whereas her female characters, Maureen Wendall and Nadine Greene in *them*, merely act out roles in some (male) author's fiction. This probably unconscious projection of Oates's authorial power upon male characters is symptomatic, I believe, of a certain anxious authorship in her fiction in the 1960s, an anxiety rooted more in gender than in social class. Indeed, in the final pages of *them* lower-class Maureen asserts herself more effectively than does her counterpart Nadine from the uppermiddle class suburb of Grosse Point, a passive princess whose problems Oates also explores in "How I Contemplated the World."

We see, for example, that the unnamed narrator of "How I Contemplated the World" refers to herself only in the third person, as "the girl," whereas Richard Everett, as narrator of *Expensive People*, begins his memoirs with the bold, "I was a child murderer". Although both are children of wealth, only Richard readily assumes an authorial persona, speaking from the place of a violently preestablished, coherent authorial "I." By contrast, the girl, who has no preestablished I, illustrates Judith Kegan Gardiner's point that female identity is a process that does not conform to the Oedipal myth of a unique, whole, and coherent self. Moreover, though Gardiner suggests that women often define themselves through the act of writing, the girl does not. Although both of these privileged adolescents have been educated in elite private schools, only Richard writes well. Moreover, only Richard dares to criticize America. His highly polished memoirs are a savage satire of the values of a consumer society, the same values his parents uphold. Richard's confession that he has killed his mother, not his father, is even more sophisticated satire—an inversion of the Oedipal plot that functions as a critique of the model of identity promoted by the Freudian psychiatrists who, of course, fail in their attempts to "cure" him.

The socially determined personae adopted by both of these adolescents—the male "author" and the female "character"—are ultimately self-destructive. For example, it is apparent from the girl's essay, a disorganized outline of her experience of running away from home, that she is a character still in search of a (male) author, a lover to replace her father; whereas Richard, a mirror image of the girl, is already an accomplished author, but one whose I has been established by violence, by matricide. His satire reeks of aggression, not only against his parents but against most adults, including his anticipated readers. Helplessly acting out the script of the passive female character and the aggressive male author, these adolescents clearly acquiesce to traditional gender roles. Like many other adolescents in Oates's early fiction, as Robert Fossum says, they

feel as if they are "actors in a script written and directed by someone else." Both "How I Contemplated the World" and *Expensive People* also illustrate Fossum's point that "repeatedly, Oates's people crave an order associated with 'home' and the loving protection of the father. Repeatedly, this conflicts with the yearning for the 'road' and freedom from the father."

Of course, "lighting out for the territory" is hardly a new metaphor for the struggle for selfdefinition in American fiction. Huck Finn and Holden Caufield are well-known examples of adolescents who not only run away, but narrate their stories of flight with considerable insight. This male tradition may lead Fossum to conclude that the yearnings of adolescents in Oates's fiction, whether for home or for the road, are "expressions of a struggle to control their own lives against the forces of 'accident,' circumstances, [and] other people." Here Fossum minimizes the desire for relationship implicit in the metaphor of "home," perhaps because his unexamined model of identity formation is, in fact, based upon male experience. This romantic model of identity places emphasis on control and autonomy, almost to the exclusion of connectedness. Yet whether we are at home or in flight, we define ourselves only in relationship to others; even our declarations of independence must be acknowledged by someone, as Jessica Benjamin points out. In both her criticism and fiction Oates emphasizes, as does Benjamin, that the self is socially embedded, or "interconnected." Oates also shares with Bakhtin a belief in the relational nature of consciousness, a conception of the self constructed in and through language. And if we accept the notion that identity is formed through both private and public discourses, it follows that, as Bakhtin says, language "ventriloquate[s]" us. It then becomes apparent why Bakhtin asserts that "we must all, perforce, become authors." If we do not author language, language authors us.

It is not surprising, however, that Oates's experiences as a woman make her more attentive than Bakhtin to the ways that gender complicates selfdefinition or self-authorship. In fact, the problem of self-authorship became an "obsession" for Oates, as she says in a 1973 comment about "How I Contemplated the World." She defines this story's Theme—which, she states, "so obsessed me that I've treated it half a dozen times, perhaps more"- as the riddle of "why we leave home or make vain attempts to leave home, or failing that, yearn to leave home." She adds, "there are many ways of leaving." She intimates that one way of leaving home is literal; another is imaginative. Both ways pose considerably greater problems for young women, as Oates implies in this elaboration of her theme:

While you're away, trying to map out another life, new parents or stray adults or simply anyone with an I.Q. one point above yours conquers you. They just walk up to you and take hold. That's that. The puzzle is, how do we become these people who victimize us? They are so charming, so much in control of their bitten-off part of the world; they are so very masculine.

This comment betrays a degree of autobiographical anxiety about how Oates herself is to leave home, how she is to leave the house of fiction the "masters" have built. How, for example, is she to use her own high I.Q.? How is she to claim authorial power

without becoming one of those who victimize others, one of those "very masculine" authors who are "so much in control of their bittenoff part of the world"?

Yet Oates's remark about those who "just walk up to you and take hold" at least implies a democratic ideal. One might go further and assert that this image of over-aggressive masculinity suggests the need for a more maternal conception of authorial power, power that nurtures rather than controls. Oates also understands that such nurturant power—more a daughter's inheritance than a son's&mdashlacks cultural authority, since it has, historically, been limited to the domestic sphere. As Lynda Boose and Betty Flowers point out, the authority a daughter inherits from a mother is not parallel to that which a son inherits from a father. Oates explores this power disparity in *Expensive People*. She lays bare the gender politics of the Oedipal myth of authorial power by creating a writer who is also Richard's mother. Thus Richard must "kill" his mother, rather than his father, in order to acquire authorial power. Imagining himself a character in his mother's fiction, a violent man in a short story called "The Sniper," Richard literally acts out the part of "the sniper." Eventually, having failed to win his mother's attention, he turns his gun against her, against the mother who is forever abandoning him because, as we learn, she is unhappy with the constraints of her social identity—as Mrs. Everett, wife and mother. Richard's psychiatrists, blinded by their belief in one plot, an Oedipal plot of course, assume that he has fantasized the matricide. Their own gender politics cause them to deny Richard's credibility, as he anticipates many of his readers will also.

But *Expensive People* is more than a satire of Oedipal plots and psychiatric theories of personality. It is also a satire of Joyce Carol Oates's previous fiction. Some of the titles written by Richard's mother, Natashya (Nada) Everett, are the same as those by Oates: "The Molester," for example, and "Building Tension in the Short Story." Why this self-satire? The fact is that, like Nada, Oates has written violent plot lines for her male protagonists. Her first two novels end in suicide—Shar Rule's in *Expensive People*, Swan Revere's in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, and now Richard Everett's, as promised, at the end of his memoir, *Expensive People*. This pattern of violent closure explains why Oates perceives herself, like Nada, as sacrificing her heroes for aesthetic purposes: to "build tension" in her fiction. Significantly; in her next novel, *them*, both Maureen Wendall and her brother Jules physically survive, but they do not escape traditional gender scripts. Indeed, at the end of the novel, they seem fated to reenact old scripts, scripts that transform victims into victimizers.

How do we [not] become these people who victimize us? Oates returns to this question in *them*, once again exploring—through the creation of an alternate self—how to nurture the young. This time she portrays herself as a teacher, a "Miss Oates" who fails a student just as her counterpart, Nada Everett in *Expensive People*, failed her son. In particular, Miss Oates flunks a young woman named Maureen Wendall, a student who attended her English class at the University of Detroit night school. After leaving the class, Maureen writes a letter to Miss Oates which begins positively, "I think I am writing to you because I could see, past your talking and your control and the way you took notes car carefully in your books while you taught, writing down your own words as you said them, something like myself." But in a subsequent letter Maureen says bluntly, "You failed me," explaining that on the only paper she had handed in, Miss Oates had written

"*Lack of coherence and development* " in blue ink, along with a failing grade. Like *Expensive People*, this novel illustrates the failure of an educated adult woman—writer, mother, or teacher&mdashto nurture the young. Oates has yet to create an adult woman who uses her imagination, as Oates herself does, to move beyond powerlessness. Although her novels criticize the socio-economic system that destroys the human potential not only of "them" but also of "expensive people," they fail fully to elucidate&mdashor transform—their own equally oppressive gender scripts.

In the Author's Note to *them*, however, Oates calls attention to this problem, as if after completing the novel she could finally see the gender issue more clearly. Although Joanne Creighton thinks that most readers will find the author of the Note "indistinguishable in any way from the 'real' author," herself at least as a co-creator, shaper of dreams, one who transforms images into art? Susan Gubar argues that this problem is common to female writers:

Because of the forms of self-expression available to women, artistic creation often feels like a violation, a belated reaction to male penetration rather than a possessing and controlling. Not an ejaculation of pleasure but a reaction to rending . . . a painful wounding, a literal influence of male authority. If artistic creativity is likened to biological creativity, the terror of inspiration for women is experienced as the terror of being entered, deflowered, possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished—all words which illustrate the pain of the passive self whose boundaries are being violated.

Waller describes Oates in similar terms, as "almost passively open to the tortures and obsessions, the agonies of the particular place and time of America today." But in *them* it is not a woman but her hero Jules whom Oates describes as "torn apart" by his love for his family—"dragged to the bottom of the river by chains of love," just as, during the writing process, Oates herself is torn by contending voices. By contrast, Nadine doesn't want to be touched, doesn't want to "'get them mixed up with myself, everybody so close.'"

This gendered self-division occurs, I think, because Oates projects her authorial powers onto her male character, Jules, and her anxieties about loss of control onto her female characters, Maureen and Nadine. By the early 1970s, in *Marriages and Infidelities*, Oates escapes monologic (either male or female) gender archetypes by redefining this struggle for authority as both love *and* infidelity to the masters of fiction, both marriage *and* resistance to monologic authorial control; but in the 1960s, Oates had not yet satisfactorily defined her own authority, or that of her female characters. The difficulty is, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, that defining the canon as shaped by Oedipal struggle—with the pen as phallus—creates difficulties for the female writer. Yet as Oates continued to seek a different self, and a new kind of authority, she resurrected "the girl" again and again. In "How I Contemplated the World," for example, she gives a young woman the persona of author and the chance to author herself, but all her dreams lead her either back home or to her tyrannical lover Simon, both of which are "evil" choices. As Oates comments, "It's a story with an evil ending because not only must you return home again (lacking the power, I mean the economic and physical power, to stay away), but while you're away, trying to map out a new life, new parents or

stray adults or simply anyone with an I.Q. one point above yours conquers you." This comment may apply to either young men or women, but adolescent girls suffer more severely from lack of economic and physical power, as well as the habit of allowing others to dominate them. Men can assume the role of author, of conqueror, whereas women become anxious when they acquire power. If women are to become selfauthoring, how should they redefine authorial power? Thus, the young writer of "How I Contemplated the World" enacts Oates's own struggle to leave home, a struggle to re-imagine both conventional characters and conventional endings.

The young narrator of "How I Contemplated the World" begins bravely, but she too is fated to act out the metaphysics of romance plots. She drafts an essay for Mr. Forest, a man she describes as "sweet and rodentlike," who is nevertheless more powerful than she because, she writes, he "has conferred with the principal and my parents and everything is fixed." According to their agreement, and according to convention, her identity is "fixed," stable, already defined. Indeed, in the upper-class "heaven" of Grosse Point, her desire does not exist. In this materialistic world, even her actions, however "bad," have no consequences. Her parents, the principal, and Mr. Forest agree to "treat her as if nothing has happened, a new start, begin again, only sixteen years old, what a shame, how did it happen?" Yet the girl, as she calls herself, desires something. She is hungry for something. She opens her essay with a description of herself before the "fall": "The girl (myself) is walking through Branden's, that excellent store. Suburb of a large famous city that is a symbol for large famous American Cities. The event sneaks up on the girl, who believes she is herding it along with a small, fixed smile, a girl of fifteen, innocently experienced." She sees herself, in retrospect, as "innocently experienced," someone who thinks she is in control of events but who suddenly finds herself stealing a pair of gloves. This theft, like leaving home, is a desperate attempt to resist the role of passive virgin. Like Alice in Wonderland, the girl desires experience, desires a fall. This necessary fall, this journey into the world below&mdashto what she calls "poking around in the debris" of Detroit— appears regularly in the romance, usually as a pattern of descent experienced by the hero. Generally, of course, the role of heroine in a romance is more restrictive: she is more often a victim than an initiator of action, more often concerned with preserving her virginity than with gaining experience, sexual or otherwise.

The girl is striving, heroically, to break this pattern, a pattern that Oates also explored in the figure of Nadine in *them*. Nadine acts the part of a passive object to the questor Jules who, despite his lower class origins, has greater freedom to initiate action, and greater freedom of imagination as well. The girl, however, anticipates no response and no changes in her static world; she assumes that her parents and teachers won't hear her. Yet "How I Contemplated the World" also explores ways to alter gender roles in the romance plot, making the young woman the initiator of action, and providing her with a guide to the world below. Clarita, the young black woman who guides her in the world of "them," says, "I can never figure out why girls like you bum around down here," and asks, "What are you looking for anyway?" It is difficult for Clarita, who imagines herself moving up—as she watches television—to imagine someone wanting to move down. Yet Clarita and the girl are both victimized by Simon. A drug addict and a pimp, Simon might have played the part of romantic hero, but having escaped from a world very

much like the young white woman's, he says, cynically, "Once I was Huckleberry Finn . . . now I am Roderick Usher." If he is Roderick Usher, locked in his mad house, the young woman's fate should be obvious to her, and yet she can't seem to resist this mirror image of herself. Behaving like a sacrificial victim, she allows herself to be sexually abused by him and, she tells us, sold to other men for drug money when she was "too low for him." Even so, the girl confesses that she would go back to Simon, if she could. "Would I go back to Simon again? Would I lie down in all that filth and craziness? Over and over again." Like her author, Joyce Carol Oates, she is drawn back to a man like Simon, a man whose apparent capacity for conquest, for the heroic, fascinates her.

Oates tells of this fascination in her 1980 preface to *Three Plays*, plays she describes as rituals of sacrifice behind "a surface realism and a prose facade." In these plays it is men who become "mock-saviors and mock-playwrights," and "whose refusal to be mere third-person characters assures them victory." The problem for a female writer is how to be democratically both, how to be her own author while at the same time a character in the lives of others. Such traditional gendering of authorial power is a puzzle that Oates explicitly acknowledges in a 1982 discussion of her childhood reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*:

I might have wished to be Alice, that prototypical heroine of our race, but I knew myself too shy, too readily frightened of both the unknown and the known (Alice, never succumbing to terror, is not a real child), and too mischievous. . . . Though a child like me, she wasn't telling her own story; that godly privilege resided with someone named, in gilt letters on the book's spine, "Lewis Carroll."

Having become Joyce "Carroll" Oates, she found the masculine authorial self a problem throughout the 1960s; she remained puzzled about how to be a female writer without victimizing others, without forcing them to act as characters in a script determined by someone with "godly privilege." Oates managed to solve this riddle, but not before experiencing a personal crisis.

This personal crisis was resolved, according to Joanne Creighton, by writing the story "*Plot*." Although "*Plot*" may be read as the story of a young man who commits suicide, it also tells the story of the character's author, who self-consciously identifies with her hero, but at the same time strives to differentiate herself from him. Oates solves her anxiety about authorial power by sharing it with readers, by fully disclosing the writing process, by demystifying it. As the first two lines of the story show, this self-disclosure requires graphic selfdivision:

Given: the existence of X. / Given: the existence of myself. / Given: X's obsessive interest in me. / Given: the universe we share together, he and I, which has shrunk into an area about two miles square in the center of this city.

The writer then hypothesizes that X "is on a mission of reclamation, a private detective hired by my father; he is a police agent." Here it becomes apparent that the character is "he," whereas the writer, the I, experiences the character, X, as a paternal agent. He = X = Paternal Agent = Author = Violence. The I imagines she has committed some offense.

Could that offense have been to claim the right to be both woman and writer, and furthermore, to write as a woman? This graphic self-division marks the point at which Oates rejects the notion of a unified self—an I in competition with all others—consciously adopting, as part of her writing strategy, Gardiner's notion of identity as process. In "Plot," Oates makes this process visible, opening a space—on the same plane—for a writer's more democratic self-division into all her characters, regardless of gender.

Source: Brenda O. Daly, "'How Do We [Not] Become These People Who Victimize Us?': Anxious Authorship in the Early Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates," in *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, edited by Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, State University of New York Press, 1993, pp. 235-52.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Park interprets the story's structure, imagery, motifs, and verbal echoes to show that the title reflects the protagonist's return to "a place that before had failed her miserably."

Joyce Carol Oates is a most prolific writer. Born in 1938, she has now published seven novels, five collections of short stories, two volumes of poetry, a collection of critical essays, and a number of uncollected stories, poems, and essays. Any reader who undertakes a critical study of Oates's production finds himself in very fertile but almost wholly uncultivated ground; the primary material is there, rich and teeming, but so far subjected to little serious analytical consideration. The short fiction particularly holds abundant possibilities for critical development: there are depths of mythic patterns, psychological probings, and structural complexities; however, only the shallowest spade work has been done. Indicative of the richness is the short piece of experimental fiction called "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life over Again."

The title itself, with its seventeen words, suggests a departure from the conventional practice of relatively short titles. The headnote for the story provides a further hint as to the experimental quality of what is to follow: "Notes for an essay for an English class at Baldwin Country Day School; poking around in debris; disgust and curiosity; a revelation of the meaning of life; a happy ending. . . ." A prefiguration of the contrapuntal nature of the story is evident in these preliminaries: on the one hand, the abstractions of contemplation, revelation, the meaning of life, beginning life over again; on the other, the tangibility of the Detroit House of Correction and an English class at Baldwin Country Day School.

When the events of the story are arranged chronologically, what emerges is this: A fifteenyear- old girl from a wealthy family steals a pair of gloves from a department store, even though she has money—"bills, she doesn't know how many bills"—in her purse. The store detective stops her, someone notifies her parents, her physician father talks to the owner of the store, and no charges are filed. The girl's mother takes her shopping in an attempt to understand the actions; the girl is apathetic, thinking but not saying aloud, "I wanted to steal but not to buy." Weeks later, the girl leaves school in midafternoon and takes a bus to downtown Detroit. There she is taken in by a prostitute, lives with her and her lover Simon, participates in sexual relations with Simon and with men Simon brings in. Someone, she thinks Simon, turns her in to the authorities as a minor and she is taken to the Detroit House of Correction, where she is most uncooperative and refuses to give any information as to her past or her identity, vowing she will never return home. Then, one night, two girls beat her severely, she is hospitalized, and her father takes her home— back to school, with twice-weekly appointments with a female psychiatrist. Now sixteen, she sits in her pink room on Sioux Drive in Bloomfield Hills and makes notes for an essay for her English class.

The "notes for an essay" are presented in twelve divisions marked with Roman numerals. At first glance, one surmises from the form that this is the work of a careful student, arranging material in an orderly fashion (twelve sections, reminiscient of *The Aeneid, Paradise Lost*, and such novels as James's *The Ambassadors*, a year's installments) for the purpose of organizing experience into a coherent system. Such an assumption, however, is erroneous, for the divisions do not constitute a topical outline; neither are they chronological. Instead, they are repetitive, disjointed, and dispersive—in other words, indicative of the state of mind of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, confused, questioning, attempting to make sense of the senseless, to impose order upon chaos.

The major divisions are these:

I Events

II Characters

III World Events

IV People & Circumstances Contributing to This Delinquency

V Sioux Drive

VI Detroit

VII Events

VIII Characters

IX That Night

X Detroit

XI Characters We Are Forever Entwined With

XII Events

Three divisions are labeled "Events"—the first, the seventh, and the twelfth. Hence the story begins, centers, and ends in recollected action; and action at least is relatively unequivocal, however ambiguous the motives behind the action. Two other sections are linked to events—section III, "World Events," the total content of which is the single word "Nothing," and section IX, "That Night," a brief description (five sentences, two of which are short ques tions) of the beating which sent the girl to the hospital.

Three divisions are labeled "characters." Sections II and VIII follow immediately "event" divisions, and XI, with the amplified heading, "Characters We Are Forever Entwined With," immediately precedes the final "event" division. Section IV seems to link together

the idea of characters ("people") and events ("circumstances"), but again the entire section consists of one word, "Nothing."

The remaining three divisions are basically descriptive: V, a picture of Sioux Drive, and VI and X, brief delineations of Detroit. Thus it appears that the girl is trying to organize her material around three points, possibly suggested by her English teacher. Events, Characters, and Places are the focal points of her outline, but there is no intrinsic order to the arrangement of points; it is random, apparently unpurposeful. What knits the scraps of information together into a movingly effective totality is not the protagonist's pathetic effort to establish meaningful continuity, but the artist's skillful interweaving of motifs and verbal echoes.

Basic to the ultimate unity of the story is a pattern of contrasts. The title and the headnote suggest this contrapuntal interplay; the story elaborates upon the suggestion. Bloomfield Hills is contrasted with inner-city Detroit, the girl's mother with the prostitute Clarita, the girl's father with the procurer-addict Simon. The differences are vast— and yet in each case the contrast is intensified by a curious and significant identity. But most important is the duality of the girl herself.

The pattern of contrasts is established by unlike settings. Bloomfield Hills is an exclusive suburb with "monumental houses" located on curving lanes with such names as Sioux Drive and Burning Bush Way and Du Maurier Drive and Lois Lane. There are no prosaic "streets" in Bloomfield Hills. The houses are Georgian and Colonial and French- Normandy, imitations of other cultures and other times, with columns and baywindows and "fireplaces in living room, library, recreation room, paneled walls wet bar five bathrooms five bedrooms two lavatories central air conditioning automatic sprinkler automatic garage door . . . a breakfast room a patio a large fenced lot fourteen trees a front door with a brass knocker never knocked." Detroit, on the other hand, is a world that is "falling out the bottom." In Detroit there are streets and avenues, 12th Street, Fourteenth Street, Woodward Avenue, Livernois Avenue. Instead of the "heartbreaking sidewalks, so clean" of Bloomfield Hills, there is filthy pavement from which "scraps of paper flutter in the air like pigeons, dirt flies up and hits you right in the eye, oh Detroit is breaking up into dangerous bits of newspaper and dirt, watch out." While the Bloomfield Hills police are "quiet private police, in unmarked cars. Cruising on Saturday evenings with paternal smiles for the residents," the Detroit city police are hated "cops" who are not paternal: "It took three of them to get me in the police cruiser . . . and they put more than their hands on my arm."

Bloomfield Hills is characterized by stores with "many mild pale lights, easy on the eye and the soul . . . [and] women shoppers with their excellent shoes and coats and hair dos, all dawdling gracefully, in no hurry." The curving residential drives are "slow"; the policemen "quiet"; the rooms "lovely in the sunlight"; this is a world of "God in gold and beige carpeting, . . . and the miracle of a clean polished gleaming toaster and faucets that run both hot and cold water." Detroit is "pavement and closed-up stores; grillwork over the windows of a pawnshop." Instead of quiet and slow and heavy, Detroit is "hazardous," "restless"; it is a world that boils and shoots and aches. Instead of beige carpeting and chandeliers, Detroit rooms have "a mattress on the floor" and "wallpaper

hanging in strips." Whereas the living room in a five bedroom Colonial house at 250 Sioux Drive is "thirty by twenty-five," Simon lives in a "six-by-six room."

The winds blow nothing to Sioux Drive, "no odors of hollyhocks or forsythia," nothing it does not already possess. Sioux Drive has everything it could desire. In Detroit, however, Simon longs for the "cold clean air . . . from Canada" which might bring a degree of purification to the dirty city streets. And in Bloomfield Hills, even weather vanes, "had they weather vanes, don't have to turn with the wind, don't have to contend with the weather. There is no weather." The suburban way of life is insulated, artificially cooled and heated and cleaned. As the girl "dreams along the corridors" of the Baldwin Country Day School, she "presses her face against the Thermoplex glass. No frost or steam can ever form on that glass." There is no such insulation, no such freedom from contention with the elements in the inner city; section VI, the first of the two sections describing Detroit, begins, "There is always weather in Detroit. Detroit's temperature is always 32°. Fast-falling temperatures. Slow-rising temperatures. Wind from the north-northeast four to forty miles an hour" and ends, "Detroit's temperature is 32°. Fast-falling temperatures. Wind from the north-northeast four to forty miles an hour." Inner-city life is cold, hovering on the point of freezing, with wildly fluctuating winds.

Bloomfield Hills and Detroit are so different that it seems hardly possible that they exist only a few miles apart. The same destructive force which the girl experiences in the Detroit House of Correction, however, is for her a terrifying interloper upon the insulated tranquillity of Bloomfield Hills. The two girls, one black and one white, who corner the protagonist in the lavatory on "that night" and beat her unmercifully are executing "revenge on the oppressed minorities of America! revenge on the slaughtered Indians! revenge on the female sex, on the male sex, revenge on Bloomfield Hills, revenge revenge." In Detroit "shoppers shop grimly, their cars are not parked in safe places, their windshields may be smashed and graceful ebony hands may drag them out through their shatterproof smashed windshields, crying, Revenge for the Indians!" Bloomfield Hills is the place where there is no weather, where the windshields shield residents from the wind, but if the locked locks and the nailed-shut doors of the Detroit House of Correction provide no safety, neither does suburbia; the shatterproof windshields can be smashed. Thus the "happy ending" of the headnote is more accurately a desperate retreat behind the Thermoplex glass, but with no real assurance of impregnability. The girl, as she makes notes for the assigned essay, shivers at the thought of Simon climbing in through her bedroom window to strangle her: "Why do I shiver? I am now sixteen and sixteen is not an age for shivering." Her teeth chatter at the irrational thought of being sued should she unintentionally divulge the identity of the famous automotive designer for whom her family's house was originally built. She even fears the maid who evidently has worked for the family for years; on her return home, the girl is "weeping, weeping, though Billie the maid is *probably listening*" and "Billie the maid is *no doubt* listening from the kitchen as I burst into tears and the hysteria Simon got so sick of." So Bloomfield Hills and Detroit, different as they are, are really two sides of one coin, a coin of insecurity and potential violence.

The mother-Clarita contrast also fits this pattern. Whereas the mother is a "lady [with] hair like blown-up gold . . . hair and fingers and body of inestimable grace," Clarita is a

"woman" with "hair long and falling into strands, not recently washed." The expensive clothing which the girl's mother wears—coat, boots, gloves, a fur hat&mdash provides protection against the cold of the Michigan winter and, symbolically, against the encroachment of the ugly in life. Clarita, in contrast, wears jeans, a sweater, "unwashed underclothes, or no underclothes," and there is no protection for this woman whose face is exhausted, over-wrought, from her experiences as a prostitute since the age of thirteen. "At the age when I was packing my overnight case for a slumber party at Toni Deshield's [shield, protection, insulation]," the narrator notes, "she was tearing filthy sheets off a bed and scratching up a rash on her arms." Too, Clarita tells her about tearing the wallpaper from the walls with her teeth, fighting for her life one night against a "barbaric tribe" of men "high from some pills." These events surely are foreign to the mother who drives a "heavy . . . big car, a Lincoln, long and black" in Bloomfield Hills where all the women drive "automobiles bought of Ford and General Motors and Chrysler, very heavy automobiles. No foreign cars."

Faithfully, diligently, the mother performs the proper rites to care for her body, her mind, and her civic obligations; she belongs to the athletic club and the golf club, to the "Village Women's Club at which lectures are given each winter on Genet and Sartre and James Baldwin, by the Director of the Adult Education Program at Wayne State University," to the country club and the art association and the Founders Society of the Detroit Institute of Arts. She is "in perpetual motion," while Clarita "lounges" by the highway, hitchhiking, or "slouches" on a counter stool in a diner. Clarita's "adult education" comes from the late movies on television, where she can experience vicariously "all those marvelous lives" she might have lived had her pre-adult education not been so explicit. Clarita knows nothing of Sioux Drive or Raymond Forrest; "Harvard Business School could be at the corner of Vernor and 12th Street for all she cares, and Vietnam might have sunk by now into the Dead Sea under its tons of debris, for all the amazement she could show

Despite their differences, however, the mother and the prostitute are akin. Both are puzzled by the girl. The mother is first introduced as a voice&mdash "earnest, husky . . . saying, 'If you wanted gloves [love?], why didn't you say so? Why didn't you ask for them?"' She later asks, on the abortive shopping trip, "What's wrong with you, what can I do for you, why are you so strange?" The girl first encounters Clarita as a voice on the streets of closed-down barber shops and diners and movie houses and faces: "Honey, are you looking for somebody down here?" and later, "I never can figure out why girls like you bum around down here. What are you looking for anyway?" Neither woman appreciates the younger girl's frustration; neither can answer the questions raised by her actions. And if Clarita is like the mother in her inability to understand the girl, the two are also similar in the inadequacy of what they do offer to her. The mother's attempts to buy things to fill the void in her daughter's life are rebuffed; Clarita's proffered sanctuary from the alien streets is accepted only briefly and then is rejected.

Of particular significance is the likelihood that the girl subconsciously considers both her mother and Clarita to be her rivals. Seemingly sensing that the competition with her mother is unequal, she associates her with grace and motion—and heaviness: "Heavy weighs the gold on the back of her hairbrush and hand mirror. Heavy heavy the

candlesticks in the dining room. Very heavy is the big car, a Lincoln, long and black, that on one cool autumn day split a squirrel's body in two unequal parts." In this context the squirrel may be representative of the girl (note the rhyme) since the girl on more than one occasion mentions the *chattering* of her teeth and describes herself as wearing a close-fitted coat with a fur collar; thus she may see herself as being destroyed in the rivalry with the more powerful older woman. The girl, therefore, wants to hurt her mother; she says that "her mother's heart would break to see" the dirty yellow Kleenex in her purse; in the same purse is a lipstick called Broken Heart&mdash and in the same sentence there are these words: "Her fingers are trembling like crazy; her teeth are beginning to chatter; her insides are alive; her eyes glow in her head; she is saying to her mother's astonished face *I want to steal but not to buy*." Since the mother is not present at the moment being described, it is likely that the girl is vitalized by the thought of the shock on her mother's face, the broken heart, should she tell her mother what she is feeling. And when the girl returns home after her hospital stay, there is only one sentence which reveals that the mother is even present&mdash"Mother embraces me"—while it is the father in whose arms she cries. Clarita, too, must be a kind of rival to the girl, though a less formidable one. When the prostitute takes the girl into her apartment above a restaurant, Simon is the older woman's lover, but in a short time Simon has become the girl's lover— whether *also* or *instead* is not made clear. The girl supposes that it is Simon who turned her in to the police when he grew tired of her; she makes no conscious connection between her arrest and Clarita's saying "mournfully to me *Honey somebody is going to turn you out let me give you warning*." Perhaps there is no connection; perhaps, however, her never knowing for sure that her arrest was Simon's doing is suggestive of a refusal on her part to admit another defeat at the hands of a competitor.

In a parallel fashion, Oates develops the contrasts between the girl's father and Simon. The father is a physician for the "slightly sick" and a "player of squash and golf." His name is never mentioned; he is Dr. —. He evidently is a handsome man, for the girl describes him as "looking like a prince" when he takes her home from the hospital. Evidently, too, he is a busy man who does not have time for his daughter, at least not as much time as she wants from him. The fact that he is in Los Angeles at a medical convention when she steals the gloves suggests that she is thus demanding attention from him; evidently her ploy is successful, for her father talks to Raymond Forrest, the owner of the store, and gets her off. Where he is weeks later when she runs away from home is not indicated, but in her notes she writes, "And where was he when Clarita put her hand on my arm . . . and said, 'Honey, are you looking for somebody down here?'" She is looking for somebody, a father who will admit her importance, substantiate her self-worth, provide her with an identity so that she can answer her questions about herself: "A pretty girl? An ugly girl?"

Simon is a drifter, a parasite who lives off women. He sleeps mornings and afternoons, coming alive at night and only then with the stimulation of a pill or a cigarette. Physically he is tall, slightly stooped, with long blond hair in "spent languid curls." He describes himself thus: "Once I was Huckleberry Finn, but now I am Roderick Usher." From a wealthy background similar to the girl's, he one day simply walked away and left it, perhaps with the spirit of adventure and the restless vitality that characterize Huck Finn;

now he is a dweller in a haunted palace filled with Poe's "Vast forms that move fantastically / To a discordant melody; / While, like a rapid ghastly river, / Through the pale door, / A hideous throng rush out forever, / And laugh—but smile no more." At first, he fills the void in the girl's life. He is old enough to be her father—thirty-five. He is Clarita's lover, and, if Clarita is a substitute mother, Simon is a substitute father. The sexual relationship between the girl and Simon is an acting-out of her Electra complex. In her notes she asks, "Would I go back to Simon again? Would I lie down with him in all that filth and craziness? Over and over again." She has answered her own question. One must note, however, the typography:

Would I lie down with him in all that filth and craziness? Over and over again. a Clarita is being betrayed as in front of a Cunningham Drug Store she is nervously eyeing a colored man who may or may not have money . . . .

The period after "again" completes a sentence, but the lower case "a" which follows and the spacing involved compel the reader to see an additional thought: "Over and over again a Clarita [not simply Clarita, but *a* Clarita, *any* Clarita] is being betrayed." The betrayal is instigated by Simon, but the girl shares in it; her ambivalent feelings of guilt and desire are indicative of her sense of having betrayed Clarita, the mother who saved her from the street, and her sense of having achieved some sort of victory in capturing Simon-father, however briefly, for herself.

So Simon is a surrogate father whose whole attention the girl has managed to attain. The fatherdaughter analogy is further enhanced by Simon's words to her: "*Ah Baby*! " and "*You are such a little girl*." One morning Simon "forces her to give him an injection with that needle she knows is filthy, she has a dread of needles and surgical instruments and the odor of things that are to be sent into the blood, *thinking somehow of her father* " (italics mine). But Simon too deserts her. He is displeased with her moods and when she is "down too low for him," he loans her to a bearded friend of his for three days; on other occasions, he takes from her bills which are "passed into her numb hands by men." When he forces her to give him the injection, she is terrified that the drug may kill him, and yet she does what he asks, viewing her action as a gift she can give him, and the drug as a "magic that is more than any woman can give him, striking the back of his head and making him stretch as if with the impact of a terrible sun." After the injection, when she tries to embrace him, he "pushes her aside and stumbles to his feet. *Jesus Christ*, he says."

She speculates that it is Simon who, "tired of her and her hysteria," has the city police take her to the Detroit House of Correction. Even in the House of Correction, she will not talk about Simon, keeping him her secret while "she aches still for Simon's hands and his caressing breath, though he gave her little pleasure." Then, when her real father takes her home, she once again has *his* attention; she is "convulsed in Father's arms" and vows she "will never leave again, never, why did I leave, where did I go, what happened, my mind is gone wrong, my body is one big bruise." In her mind the events of the recent past are being replayed over and over, "perpetually are Simon's hands moving across my body and adding everything up and so too are Father's hands on my

shaking bruised back, far from the surface of my skin on the surface of my good blue cashmere coat."

The contrapuntal pattern, omnipresent in the story, is ultimately traceable to the dichotomy within the girl herself. She has a desperate need for love, security, self-approbation. Her insecurity is revealed, for example, in the variety of substantives she uses to refer to herself. She never mentions her name; "Honey" is the only form of address anyone uses for her. Most frequently she refers to herself as "the girl" or with a third person feminine pronoun. Occasionally she shifts to first person, as in the first sentence of the story: "The girl (myself) is walking through Branden's, that excellent store." The second division of the first section begins, "The girl seated at home. . . . Someone is talking to me," and the third division of the first section describes "Mother in her black coat, I in my close fitted blue coat. . . . The girl droops along in her coat." There are also first-person plural pronouns: "We live on Sioux Drive" and "our maid Billie." Once in this first section, she refers to herself indirectly in the second person when she says, "The strings draw together in a cat's cradle, making a net to save you when you fall"; obviously the net of connections she refers to is the net which "saved" her and brought her back to Sioux Drive. This same mixing of referents occurs through a large part of the story; only in the last two sections does she consistently refer to herself in the first person; here she has had forced upon her the decision to retreat into the pseudo-haven of suburbia and, at least for the time being, is trying to hold on to her identity through linking herself with material objects. She sees her face reflected, "distorted" in the shiny toaster, and wonders, "Is that my face?"

Moreover, she frequently insists that she makes her own decisions, and yet she knows she does not. When she steals the gloves—which she has the money to buy and does not even really want since she considers them "ugly"—the "event sneaks upon the girl, who believes she is herding it along." In the House of Correction she refuses to talk, "not because everyone has warned her not to talk but because, because she will not talk; because she won't say anything about Simon, who is her secret." She denies that there have been any "people and circumstances contributing to this delinquency," even while she is thinking of her brother, "remembering him unclearly," remembering that he at the age of ten had stolen "trick-and-treat candy from some six-year-old kids" and that he is not doing well at the Susquehanna Boys' Academy, an "excellent preparatory school in Maine." Recalling her own stealing which began at the age of eight, her smashing of a basement window "in her own house just for fun," and her failure to do "*work compatible with her performance on the Stanford- Binet*." she can still refuse to admit contributory influences. She summarizes "World Events" as "Nothing," attempting to shut out the world beyond the shaky security of Bloomfield Hills. Nevertheless, this self-sufficiency is illusory. It is akin to the names given to the teenage singing groups "of 1968 . . . *The Certain Forces, The Way Out, The Maniacs Responsible* ."

Typical of nearly every division of the notes is an ambivalence, revealed partially through the device of interrogatives. Of herself she has little certain knowledge, only that which can be measured empirically—her age; her height, "five feet five inches . . . ordinary height"; the color of her hair and her eyes. But value judgments she cannot make; she wonders whether she is a "pretty girl? An ugly girl?" Is Raymond Forrest "a

handsome man? An ugly man? . . . who is Raymond Forrest, this man who is my salvation?" Is Clarita "twenty, twenty-five, . . . thirty or more? Pretty, ugly, what?"

Another device frequently employed to reinforce the pattern of contrasts is the paradox. The girl sees herself as "innocently experienced." She describes her home as "Classical contemporary. Traditional modern." The temperature in Detroit is "always 32°. Fast-falling temperatures. Slow-rising temperatures." Her father's "doctoring is of the slightly sick. The sick are sent elsewhere . . . the unsick are sent to Dr. Coronet (Isabel, a lady), an excellent psychiatrist for unsick people who angrily believe they are sick and want to do something about it."

The shoplifting incident, moreover, also illustrates the contrast of the worlds inhabited by the girl. She slips the gloves into her pocket; they are encased in a plastic bag, "airproof breathproof plastic bag," as insulated and lifeless as the rest of the Bloomfield Hills world. In her purse, in the billfold containing her money, are "snapshots of the family in clean plastic windows," protected from contamination. The rest of the purse's contents, however, is not so tidy: "a blue comb, not very clean," "a lot of dirty yellow Kleenex," hairpins, safety pins, a broken pencil, a stolen ballpoint. There, too, are a "compact of Cover Girl Make-Up, Ivory Rose," and the lipstick called "Broken Heart, a corrupt pink." The girl carries with her the paraphernalia for making herself super- ficially compatible with the pastel pink world of the suburbs—the covering, masking trappings. Pink is used to characterize the culture of Bloomfield Hills; "bloom" suggests pink; Harriet Arnold's, the shop where the mother takes the girl after the gloves episode, is decorated in pastel pink, with "graceful glimmering lights"; the most expensive mansion on Sioux Drive belongs to "himself, who has the C account itself, imagine that!" whose wife has a "bathtub of smooth clean glowing pink"; the girl's room is pink and she sits in it, making notes for her essay, looking around with "sad pink eyes." Pink, a color traditionally associated with an innocent baby girl, is also a tainted white and a diluted red, neither pure nor passionate; it is an appropriate color for the "innocently experienced" protagonist and her habitat.

The girl's association of herself and the squirrel, discussed above in another context, is an exam ple of her use of animal imagery in descriptions of characters, suggestive of inability to perceive herself or anyone else as distinctly human. The store in which she steals the gloves is *Branden's* ; she *herds* her actions through the aisles; the strings of connections "draw together in a *cat's* cradle, making a *net* to save you." She leans against a window and a smudge of grease from her forehead appears on the pane; she wonders if "she could be boiled down to grease" as are cattle and sheep in a rendering plant. Her English teacher, Mr. Forest, whose "name is plain, unlike Raymond Forrest's, . . . is sweet and *rodent* like. Simon thinks of being chased over the "Canadian border on foot, *hounded* out in a blizzard of broken glass and horns." He is "always cold," perhaps like a reptile since he "uncoils" emotion in the girl. He "emerges from the cracks at dark" like a rat or a cockroach; he moves in "a feline cautious way, . . . always on guard." (All italics in this paragraph are mine.)

An additional motif, not extensively developed but clearly in keeping with the protagonist's diffi- culty in discerning reality, involves romantic stories and fairy tales.

Her psychiatrist is Dr. Coronet (a crown); the doctor's first name is Isabel (Queen Isabella and a variant of Elizabeth); Dr. Isabel Coronet is "queenly, an elegant nicotine-stained lady." Princess, the black girl who attacks the narrator in the House of Correction, spends her spare time reading *Nancy Drew and Jewel Box Mystery*. Simon, who once thought of himself as Huck Finn, now thinks of himself as Roderick Usher. The girl's explanation that her "head hangs heavy as a pumpkin on my shoulders, and my hair has just been cut by Mr. Faye at the Crystal Salon" invokes images of Cinderella with the pumpkin and the crystal slipper, Rapunzel with long, heavy hair, and fay, a fairy or elf. The father who takes her home from the hospital is "a prince himself, come to carry me off," and on one occasion she speculates "that weeds might climb everywhere over that marvelous $180,000 house [as in "Sleeping Beauty"] and dinosaurs might return to muddy the beige carpeting, but never never will she reconcile four o'clock in the morning in Detroit with eight o'clock breakfasts in Bloomfield Hills."

Religious imagery, too, colors the story, but without evidence of serious commitment on the girl's part. The title and the headnote suggest contemplation, revelation, and rebirth, and indeed the girl leaves the hospital "bruised and saddened and converted." Mr. Forrest, the English teacher, vows to "treat her as if nothing has happened, a new start, begin again," and his essay assignment makes him a confessor in that "words pour out of me and won't stop. I want to tell everything." She thinks of Raymond Forrest as "this man who is my salvation"; when his father dies of a heart attack, she wants to "write Raymond Forrest a note of sympathy. I would like to thank him for not pressing charges against me one hundred years ago, saving me." She wants to write to him "telling of my love, or some other emotion that is positive and healthy. Not like Simon and his poetry . . . but when I try to think of something to say, it is Simon's language that comes back to me, caught in my head like a bad song." Simon, then, is presented as a sort of foil to Forrest and thus perhaps an inversion of a savior; there is, of course, his name; his hands bears wounds in the palms, "teeth marks from his previous life experiences"; his poetry, which will not leave her head, declares, "I am heading upward/. . . And I am going to dissolve into the clouds." And when she gives him the injection, she sees his "bright blood" as the drug enters his body, "making his face stretch as if with the impact of a terrible sun. . . . *Jesus Christ*, he says."

The story has made clear that Sioux Drive has not in the past provided a sense of security and selfworth for the girl, and it seems unlikely that it will begin to do so now. The "beginning again" of the title, as well as the "happy ending" of the headnote, is really a return to a place that before had failed her miserably. The house to which the girl returns is "a doll's house, so lovely in the sunlight," sunlight which "breaks in movieland patches" on the roof. This is not reality, but a make-believe world of games and movies; for the present, though, it offers at least a pretense of safety. Repeatedly the girl acknowledges her retreat into security, however tenuous it may prove. Nine times in time closing section of the story she uses "never" in connection with her intention never to leave home again; her insistence suggests that this is not a conscious decision to remain, but a desperate attempt to convince herself that this is her home, a place of safety where inner conflict ends.

This incredibly concentrated story, then, is developed in such a way that structure, imagery, motifs, verbal echoes work together to create for the reader the actual experience of the experiencing mind of the protagonist. The author's experiment can only be judged a success.

Source: Sue Simpson Park, "A Study in Counterpoint: Joyce Carol Oates's 'How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again,'" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Summer, 1976, pp. 213-24.

Adaptations

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," the companion story to "How I Contemplated," was adapted as a film, *Smooth Talk*, directed by Joyce Chopra and starring Laura Dern, Treat Williams, and Mary Kay Place. It was originally produced in 1985 for the "American Playhouse Series" on the Public Broadcasting System and is available from Live Home Video and Vestron Video.

Topics for Further Study

Although the narrator seems genuinely frightened by the beating she received and seems happy to be home, do you think she is sorry for her other offenses? Has she taken responsibility for her stealing and vandalism? What do you predict for the remainder of her teenage years?

What do you think is attractive about Simon? Why does she say she would go back to him "over and over again."?

What did the city of Detroit look like in 1968? Write a description of the scene the narrator would have encountered when she got off the bus?

Could this story be written today? How would it be different? Is this story of teenage rebellion and isolation universal, or is it a story of the 1960s?

What Do I Read Next?

Dubliners (1914; rpt. 1949) by James Joyce is a collection of short stories that has become one of the classics of the coming-of-age genre. Joyce's protagonists struggle to find their identities and learn the meaning of life in vividly depicted Catholic neighborhoods of Dublin.

"Where are You Going, Where Have You Been?" by Joyce Carol Oates is the companion story to "How I Contemplated" in which a young girl's sexual awakening occurs against a backdrop of potential violence.

This Boy's Life (1989) by Tobias Wolfe is the successful college professor and writer's memoir of his childhood in an unstable family in a working-class town in the Northwest. The book, which was made into a film starring Robert De Niro and Leonardo De Caprio, is notable because the point of view never wavers from the child's perspective.

Further Study

Creighton, Joanne. *Joyce Carol Oates*, TUSAS, Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1979.

Like all volumes in this series, this book provides an overview of the author's life and work to date. It also contains a thorough and easy to use bibliography.

Milazzo, Lee, ed. *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*, University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1989.

A collection of interviews from 1969-1988, the book provides insight into the life and work of a dedicated and prolific writer.

Bibliography

Avant, James A. Interview, in *The Library Journal*, September 1, 1970.

Gilman, Richard. Review of *The Wheel of Love*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, October 25, 1970, p. 4.

Long, R. E. Review of *The Wheel of Love*, in *The Saturday Review*, October 24, 1970.

Phillips, Robert. Interview, in *The Paris Review*, Fall, 1978, pp. 199-206.

Showalter, Elaine. "My Friend, Joyce Carol Oates: An Intimate Portrait," in *Ms. Magazine*, March, 1986, pp. 44-50.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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