

Snake Eyes Short Guide

Snake Eyes by Joyce Carol Oates

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| Snake Eyes Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Characters..... | 3 |
| Social Concerns/Themes..... | 4 |
| Techniques/Literary Precedents..... | 5 |
| Key Questions..... | 6 |
| Related Titles..... | 7 |
| Copyright Information..... | 8 |



Characters

Lee Roy Sears, the artist-murderer in *Snake Eyes*, is saved from the electric chair largely because of the efforts of Michael O'Meara, a lawyer whose pro bono work has introduced him to Sears and his art. O'Meara defends him because Sears's guilt is unclear and his poverty has caused the justice system to fail him. He also defends him because of his own sense of guilt for something he cannot pinpoint, but that we learn involves the drowning of his own twin when they were two years old.

Once Michael negotiates the release of Lee Roy Sears, Sears gradually works his way into the community and into the O'Meara family, seducing or almost seducing, various women, including Michael's sister Janet and his wife Gina. Worse, Sears befriends the O'Meara's twin boys, secretly teaching them to curse and fascinating and intimidating them with his tattoo. By adding the image of the invaded and corrupted children, Oates cranks up the threatening, sinister quality of this novel. She portrays Sears, Michael, and Gina internally, revealing the processes of their minds in various states of collapse: Sears becomes more and more vicious; Michael becomes more and more dependent on drugs; and Gina breaks down after Sears attacks her, scarring her face and the mind that hides behind it.



Social Concerns/Themes

Oates caused a stir when she submitted a novel under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith to Simon and Schuster. She has said that she was not trying to deceive, but that she wanted to find a new identity as a writer to see if that identity might generate a new voice. To date, she has published four novels under the pseudonym, a play on her husband's name, Raymond Smith: *Lives of the Twins* (1987), *Soul/Mate* (1989), *Nemesis* (1990), and *Snake Eyes* (1992).

Reflective of her choice of pseudonym, all of the novels pursue the theme of double identity. All portray a murderer whose charismatic exterior masks his psychopathic self. Centering on the most disturbing dimensions of madness, which cannot be traced solely to sociological origins, Oates suggests that the forces that compel the psychopath to kill involve dimensions of brain functioning that lie outside cognition.

But the double identity of these charismatic madmen represents more than the split between the public and the private persona. Such a split also can occur as part of the creative process 3908 when the creator has no control over the unconscious forces that initiate the process.

Oates draws the connection between the psychopathic impulse and the artistic by making the murderer in *Snake Eyes* a released convict who is placed in an art therapy program and who is most proud of the snake tattoo he designed out of a "fever dream" he had in a Vietnam jungle. By connecting the psychopathic mind with the creative via the image of a snake, and, later in the novel, with increasingly pornographic statues, Oates also shows how the creative force may turn on itself to become a destructive force, particularly susceptible to the violent sexuality that has controlled the twentieth century's version of the psychopath.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Given her grounding in realistic fiction and her fascination with the obsessed or disintegrating mind, it is quite in keeping with her work that Oates has chosen to write a series of thrillers. She wants these to be popular novels, thus she writes linear, suspenseful plots that build tension by slowly increasing the level of madness in the characters. Precedents for Oates's techniques include Edgar Allan Poe's madmen in stories like "The TellTale Heart" (1843), "The Black Cat" (1843), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), and Henry James's invaded children in "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). Oates also draws on various religious and cultural beliefs in such images as twins, cats, and snakes and in concepts embodied in such abstractions as the nemesis and the soul.



Key Questions

Those who read a great deal of popular thrillers are likely to enjoy Snake Eyes and groups can be encouraged to draw on their expertise to assess the value of this genre and to compare Oates's novel to others they have read.

They could measure Oates against the standard for these novels to see whether or not she surpasses that standard.

1. How terrifying is this novel? Can you describe in what ways it is terrifying?

2. What other images of the snake do you find besides on Lee Roy's arm?

How does the image connect to the idea of evil? Who is evil? How do people become evil?

3. How well does Oates capture Michael's gradual breakdown?

4. Is Michael's revenge against Lee Roy justified? Would you call him a murderer?

5. Was Michael responsible for his twin's death? Why does Oates make him a twin? What does the fact of Michael's twinning tell us about his sons?

6. Why does Oates have Michael find the quote from The Book of Matthew about an "eye for an eye"?

7. What kind of a mother is Mrs. O'Meara? What kind of a father is Michael?

8. What kind of a marriage do the O'Mearas have?

9. Why does Oates make Janet O'Meara a television personality?

10. Besides the twins and the image of the snake eyes, what other images of the double do you find in the novel?

Why is Oates so fascinated with the double?

Related Titles

Snake Eyes and the three other novels Oates has written under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith can all be classified as thrillers. What distinguishes them from the thrillers of other novelists is their insistence on the idea of the double. Oates may be drawing on the work of Julian Jaynes, her colleague at Princeton, whose book *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* argues that the human mind once consisted of two parts, the speaking part and the hearing part. The mind, in other words, evolved from a split or double brain, with one part having an authoritative, commanding function and the other part an obeying function. Jaynes suggests that the schizophrenic brain may still be divided this way and Oates writes enough passages in each of these thrillers to suggest that she is using this theory to develop her artistic portrayal of the psychopathic mind.

Like *Snake Eyes*, *Lives of the Twins*, *Soul/Mate*, and *Nemesis* all use images of doubles and of commanding voices.

Twins appear in *Lives of the Twins*, *Nemesis*, and *Snake Eyes*; the title *Soul/ Mate* captures the idea of the double; images get doubled in tortoise shell cats, which have an unborn twin integrated in their genes (*Lives of the Twins*); the minds of characters retreat from themselves into an imagined Blue Room (*Soul/Mate*); and fugue-states provide an impulse to murder (*Nemesis*). These are terrifying novels because Oates captures in them minds out of control, unable ever to become integrated into a society that is itself dangerously fragmented and violent.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994