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“A Serious Writer”: Various Literary Techniques and Devices in the Selected Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oates from the 1960s and the Early 1970s

"Vážná spisovatelka": rozličné literární techniky a prostředky ve vybraných povídkách Joyce Carol Oatesové ze 60. a počátku 70. let

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Daniela Rydlová

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Abstract

Seven short stories written by Joyce Carol Oates in the 1960s and the 1970s are analysed in this thesis from the perspective of various literary techniques that Oates employs in her writing. The stories are “Pastoral Blood,” “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean,” “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” “Upon the Sweeping Flood,” “Norman and the Killer,” “The Dead” and “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections and Began My Life Over Again.”

The first part of this thesis is theoretical. The introduction gives a sense of Joyce Carol Oates as a serious writer and presents her conviction to depict culture and people of her time. The second chapter introduces the American reality of the 1960s and 1970s and presents all key events of the era. The first part of the chapter focuses on Detroit and the de-civilizing process of the 1960s connected to the upsurge of violence in the U.S. The second part is concerned with struggles that began in the 1960s and continued in the 1970s and challenged the role of the president, and by extension of the upper classes, in society. The last part of the chapter contains a basic summary of the civil rights movement.

The third chapter gives an overview of some of Oates’s literary influences and literary streams and techniques often found in her work: realism, psychological realism, naturalism, surrealism and the grotesque and the gothic.

The fourth chapter presents arguments that form the foundation for the analysis and interpretation of the stories. The chapter, *A dichotomy of realism and of “the other,”* provides an introduction for two literary spheres that are found, in different amounts, in each story. The first sphere is more realistic and naturalistic as it is anchored in reality: either in details with which the characters are described, or in social realities of the time, including violence and crimes or political problems. The second sphere also reflects these problems, but is more subjective, dreamy, surreal and grotesque.

The fifth chapter moves on to the interpretation itself and applies the aforementioned theory to stories “Pastoral Blood” and “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” focusing especially on realism and psychological realism and on the themes of isolation, madness and also on love that is, in many variations, a central theme for all selected stories. One of the key terms of the chapter is “mimetic transcriptions” which emphasizes the role of experience in the narratives describing how the action is replaced by reflections on reality. Furthermore, this chapter presents typical

Oatesian characters under the pressure of outside forces succumbing to threats of contemporary society. At the same time they are detached from the events that are taking place around them. The sixth chapter shows a diminishing role of realism and stronger tendencies of surrealism in “The Dead.” It serves as a stepping stone to social and natural forces that become essential for the characters in the next chapter. Similarly as in the fifth chapter it follows a pursuit of love and shares its concern with mimetic transcriptions. Also, it deals with the narrative of a mind numbed by drugs and brings into the interpretation the importance of dreams.

The seventh chapter enriches the spectrum of analysed literary streams by examination of naturalism in “Upon the Sweeping Flood” and “Norman and the Killer.” The chapter focuses on the threats of natural, social and sociological forces to which the characters succumb and on violence they subsequently commit. The essential theme of the stories is human impotence.

The theme of dreams is further analysed in the eighth chapter that adds a dimension of the grotesque working within a frame of surrealism. The analysed story is the most anthologised story of Oates: “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

The ninth chapter provides an insight into the most experimental story from the selection: “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections and Began My Life Over Again,” notable especially for its use of experiments with time and narration which is given in a series of notes for an essay.

The concluding chapter presents a synthesis of all analysed stories; at first from the perspective of chronology; secondly from the perspective of interpersonal relationships: either intergenerational or relationships between a man and a woman. The chapter attempts to find connections between the thematic circles and the use of literary techniques. The role of violence (mainly gendered) is essential for the final synthesis, especially in its connection with communication (or more likely impossibility of communication) which reveals dysfunctional relationships depicted in many instances by different than realistic techniques.

Key words: Joyce Carol Oates, American literature in the 1960s and 1970s, Realism, Naturalism, Psychological Realism, Surrealism, Grotesque, Experiments

Abstrakt

Sedm povídek z pera americké autorky Joyce Carol Oatesové je v této práci analyzováno z pohledu rozličných literárních technik, které Oatesová využívá ve svých dílech. Jedná se o povídky „Venkovská krev,“¹ „Dívka na kraji oceánu,“² „Kam jdeš a odkud?,“³ „Norman a vrah,“⁴ „Nebožtíci“⁵ a „Jak jsem rozjímal o světě uvnitř Detroitského nápravného zařízení a začala svůj život znovu.“⁶

První část této práce je teoretická. Úvod etabluje Joyce Carol Oatesovou jako vážnou autorku a představuje její snahu o vyobrazení kultury a lidských charakterů své doby. Kapitola 2 vykresluje realitu 60. a 70. let 20. století v Americe a uvádí klíčové události, které se v těchto dvou dekadách odehrály. První část této kapitoly se soustředí na Detroit a „decivilizační proces,“ který je spojován s náhlým vzestupem násilí v americké společnosti 60. let. Druhá část se zabývá úsilím, které započalo na počátku tohoto období a pokračovalo i v průběhu 70. let. To zpochybnilo roli nejen hodnot vyšších vrstev společnosti, ale i samotného prezidenta. Poslední část této kapitoly obsahuje základní shrnutí hnutí za občanská práva a protestů v americké společnosti obecně. Další kapitola pak uvádí několik autorů, kteří Oatesovou nepochybně ovlivnili, a literární proudy a techniky, jež se v díle této autorky objevily: realismus, psychologický realismus, naturalismus, surrealismus, groteska a gotika.

Čtvrtá kapitola poskytuje argumenty, které tvoří základ pro literární analýzu a interpretaci povídek; je nazvaná „Dichotomie realismu a „něčeho dalšího““ a představuje úvod do dvou literárních sfér, které se proplétají celou autorčinou tvorbou, a v různé míře se nacházejí v každé analyzované povídce. Jednak je to sféra postavená především na realismu s přesahem do naturalismu, která ukotvuje příběh v realitě, ať již pomocí detailů, se kterými jsou jednotlivé postavy popisovány, nebo vykreslením sociální reality doby, která světu ukázala temnou stránku násilí, zločinů a politických problémů. Druhá sféra sice také reflektuje tyto problémy, ale je více subjektivní, snová, někdy až surrealistická a groteskní.

¹ vlastní překlad

² vlastní překlad

³ překlad Veroniky Klusákové z: Joyce Carol Oates, „Kam jdeš, a odkud?“, přel. Veronika Klusáková, *Host* 6/2006: 96-98.

⁴ vlastní překlad

⁵ překlad názvu původní povídky „The Dead“ Jamese Joyce Aloysem Skoumalem v: James Joyce, *Dubliňané*, přel. Aloys Skoumal. Praha: Argo, 2012.

⁶ vlastní překlad

Pátá kapitola se přesouvá k samotné literární interpretaci a na povídky „Venkovská krev“ a „Dívka na kraji oceánu“ aplikuje již uvedenou teorii. Interpretace se soustředí především na techniky realismu a psychologického realismu. Z témat si vybírá hlavně izolaci postav, šílenství, ale také lásku, která je v různých obměnách stěžejním tématem u všech povídek. Jedním z hlavních termínů této kapitoly je „mimetický přepis,“ který zdůrazňuje roli osobního prožitku, díky němuž se literární narace mění z popisu akce na subjektivní vnímání reality. Dále kapitola představuje typickou oatesovskou hrdinku, která podléhá tlaku společenských sil. Pro takové postavy je také typická jistá odtažitost od reality.

Šestá kapitola ukazuje slábnoucí roli realismu a vzrůstající roli surrealismu v povídce „Nebožtíci.“ Slouží jako přechod mezi pátou a sedmou kapitolou, jelikož uvádí v souvislost přírodní a společenské síly, které jsou klíčové pro analýzu postav dalších kapitol. Pojednává také o literární naraci z pohledu mysli omámené drogami. Do interpretace přináší nové téma významu snů.

Sedmá kapitola obohacuje spektrum literárních proudů o naturalismus v povídkách „Po Potopě“ a „Norman a vrah.“ Zaměřuje se na hrozby přírodních, sociálních a sociologických sil, které se proti postavám obracejí a nutí je páchat násilí. Základním tématem obou povídek je lidská neschopnost.

K tématu snů se znovu vrací kapitola osmá, která do spektra analyzovaných literárních technik přidává grotesku. Devátá kapitola pak zkoumá nejexperimentálnější povídku z našeho výběru „Jak jsem rozjímal o světě uvnitř Detroitského nápravného zařízení a začala svůj život znovu,“ jejíž experimenty se týkají především času a narace sepsané v podobě poznámek pro esej.

Závěrečná kapitola představuje ucelený pohled na všechny analyzované povídky z hlediska chronologického a poté z hlediska mezilidských vztahů; a to jak mezigeneračních, tak vztahů mezi pohlavími, a snaží se najít souvislosti mezi tematickými celky a použitím literárních technik. Pro závěrečnou syntézu je klíčová především role násilí (často genderového) v (ne)komunikaci mezi postavami, která odhaluje dysfunkční vztahy v mnoha případech vykreslené technikami jinými než realistickými.

Klíčová slova: Joyce Carol Oatesová, Americká literatura v 60. a 70. letech 20. století, Realismus, Naturalismus, Psychologický realismus, Surrealismus, Groteska, Experimenty

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Chapter 1 Introduction: Joyce Carol Oates as a serious writer

“The serious writer, after all, bears witness. The serious writer restructures ‘reality’ in the service of his or her art, and surely hopes for a unique aesthetic vision and some felicity of language, but reality is always the foundation.”⁷

This combination of artistic fidelity and aesthetics marks the whole oeuvre of Joyce Carol Oates. It is the struggle of an author who wants to be loyal to the reality but also tries to be imaginative and unique: every story of Oates combines different elements of various literary streams and techniques and there is a great deal of experimentation in her narratives. Joyce Carol Oates’s writings were described as progressing “from the halting pace of detailed realism to the flurry of surreal speed”⁸ but even in her earliest stories one can find an astonishing variety of different literary genres, techniques and strategies as well as influences of Oates’s predecessors.

This thesis analyses elements of various literary streams and techniques that leave their mark in the selected short stories of Joyce Carol Oates written in the 1960s and early 1970s and constructs the notion of Joyce Carol Oates as a serious writer. Oates as a serious writer is the author who puts herself into the role of “drawing a culture and its people, and presenting its discrete components so that readers might gradually come to understand some of the mystery that life includes.”⁹ Such an author should present reality in detail and should describe the culture and its people with accuracy, for the readers to be able to feel the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s. Oates believed that people frequently misunderstand serious art because it is often violent and unattractive, but she wouldn’t be honest as a writer if she ignored the actual conditions around her.¹⁰

In her stories one can find key events that shaped this era: protests, violent crimes, the civil rights movement, the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy or the release of Bob Dylan’s 1962 debut album. The events taken from history are however not enough to picture the atmosphere honestly. Apart from anchoring her characters in the real world of the 1960s and 1970s, she is also giving them fidelity

⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?” *The New York Times* 29 March 1981 via <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/05/specials/oates-violent.html>.

⁸ Linda W. Wagner, “The Changing Shapes of Her Realities,” *The Great Lakes Review* 5 1979: 19.

⁹ Wagner 15.

¹⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?”

from the psychological perspective. Her stories are narratives of individuals surrounded by historical, social, political and sociological forces; and they are tales from the era perceived through the eyes of these individuals in which Oates intended to serve as the conscience of the American race.¹¹

When describing literary streams that have shaped Oates's style one must include a spectrum of these: realism, naturalism, psychological realism and surrealism along with the grotesque and the gothic. These literary streams and techniques are described in the third chapter of this thesis (p.10 - 17) directly preceding a literary interpretation of the selected short stories.

The interpretative part of the thesis deals with seven stories from five collections produced in the 1960s and early 1970s: one story from Oates's earliest collection *By the North Gate* ("Pastoral Blood"), one story from *The Goddess and Other Women* ("A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean"), two stories from *The Wheel of Love* ("Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections and Began My Life Over Again"), two stories from *Upon the Sweeping Flood* ("Upon the Sweeping Flood" and "Norman and the Killer"), and one story from *Marriages and Infidelities* ("The Dead.")

The short stories are analysed from the perspective of different literary techniques and there are divided on the basis of several thematic circles: isolation, detachment of the characters and sanity and insanity; love and drugs; and violence and helplessness of people facing natural, social and sociological forces. Last two interpretative chapters are concerned with violent predatory men.

Every chapter emphasizes two basic literary spheres that one can find in each of the analysed stories. The first sphere is more realistic and naturalistic and focuses on details with which the characters and their surroundings are described, on social realities of the time (including violence and crimes or political problems) and on forces that are created by these realities and subsequently influence behaviour of the protagonists. The second sphere also reflects these problems, but is more subjective, dreamy and surreal and sometimes grotesque. It represents personal perception of the events influenced by psychological problems and drugs.

Oates wrote in "Visions of Detroit:" "So much of my writing from approximately 1963-1976 centers upon or has been emotionally inspired by Detroit

¹¹ Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?"

and its suburbs (...) that is impossible for me, in September of 1985, to extract the historical from the fictional.”¹² Although not all selected stories take place in Detroit, the selection of the stories is based on this Detroit experience (and Detroit influence) that shaped her writings in the 1960s and 1970s.

¹² Joyce Carol Oates, “Visions of Detroit,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25.2 (1982) 309.

Chapter 2 American reality of the 1960s and 1970s

From her first collection of short stories *By the North Gate* published in 1962 to the publication of *The Goddess and Other Women* in 1974, Joyce Carol Oates continued to write about various events from the American history. They resurfaced in her texts from time to time, and created a bleak and distorted image of what one could see happening in the American society of the 1960s and early 1970s. Oates's work has been compared to a cyclorama¹³ and she stated many times that she would not be honest if she ignored the actual conditions around her. That is why she often promoted the conception of a "serious writer."

It was an era of protests, drugs, all sorts of violent crimes, insecurity and doubts but also a period of the fight for civil rights and the birth of a new "Tune in, turn on, drop out"¹⁴ counterculture generation, therefore the decades of novelties, experiments and buoyancy: from Bob Dylan to Alice Cooper, The Doors, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix or The Beach Boys.

The themes that were crucial for the American society of that time are also central to Oates's short stories; needless to say that the darker images of the era often prevail. All characters of Oates's short stories are, to a certain extent, influenced by this environment. For instance Ilena, the main heroine of "The Dead," fears sleep because she often dreams of the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, one of many assassinations that people witnessed at that time. The following paragraphs will present this environment from three different perspectives pertaining to Oates's work: the de-civilizing process of the 1960s, intergenerational struggles and the rise of people against the authority, and civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests.

2.1 Detroit and the de-civilizing process of the 1960s

Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* describes a process of a "change towards a great self-control and interdependence" that should have continued throughout the 20th century.¹⁵ The "de-civilizing process" on the other hand suggests an opposite

¹³ A cyclorama is a panoramic painting with a 360° view intended to pull the viewers into the midst of action. Oates's work was described as a cyclorama for instance in: Lee Milazzo, ed. *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1989) xii.

¹⁴ a phrase popularized by Timothy Leary for the counterculture era

¹⁵ "Decivilization in the 1960s" an excerpt from: Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London: Penguin Books, 2012) via

process, where spontaneity has the prime. The term itself describes the upsurge of violence that occurred in the 1960s. Oates moved to Detroit in 1961, a year before the publication of *By the North Gate* and lived there until 1978, so the image of (still fictional) Detroit can be seen in her novels (*With Shuddering Fall*, 1964; *Them*, 1969 and others) and also in her short stories.

The violent acts of the era were in some cases connected to the struggle for civil rights and a new identity of the young generation. One of the major events in Detroit in the 1960s was the Detroit Riots in 1967, just one of “many rebellions that erupted around the country as a result of massive unemployment and growing working-class radicalism.”¹⁶ The riots that were caused by a police raid on an illegal after-hours club resulted in approximately 40 deaths.¹⁷ Detroit in general had a reputation of a violent city but the whole States as well as Europe faced an upsurge of criminality, including rape, assault, robbery and theft.¹⁸ A change in cultural norms connected to coming of age of a new generation is, as some authors claim, the basis for the process of “de-civilization.”¹⁹

2.2 Intergenerational struggles and the rise against the authority

The 1960s saw the beginning of what can be called a period of change in American attitudes towards authority, starting with attacks on the president’s role within the US and ending with a complete revolution in the field of values and priorities of the youth. The “process of hostility to authority and a challenge of long-established hierarchies”²⁰ began in the 1960s and continued during the 1970s. “One of the deepest illusions of the Sixties was that many forms of traditional authority could be diluted – the authority of America in the world, and of the President within America – without fear of any consequences.”²¹ For the authority in the 1960s stood President Lyndon Johnson who was strongly criticized for the handling of the Vietnam War. He did not have the same believes as East Coast liberals and reporters, in the way

<<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0002.206/--decivilization-in-the-1960s?rgn=main;view=fulltext>>.

¹⁶ Michael Luongo, “Detroit Remembers How the 1967 Riots Changed the City Forever,” *The Daily Beast* 2 Aug 2017 via <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/detroit-remembers-how-the-1967-riots-changed-the-city-forever>>.

¹⁷ Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.

¹⁸ Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.

¹⁹ Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.

²⁰ Paul Johnson 555.

²¹ Paul Johnson 582.

F.D. Roosevelt and Kennedy had had; and he realized that the nation was divided. When Johnson yielded office to Richard Nixon the struggles intensified and the media continued to diminish the presidency, culminating in the Watergate crisis.²² There were many causes that led to this reversal of values:

At first, the decades saw a rise of a new counterculture²³ that stressed new themes of sexual freedom, experimentation, women's rights and distrust in government promoted especially by the young post-war generation. Themes such as "the stress on youth and glamour, and defending the freedom of young generation" were developed.²⁴

Secondly, this post-war generation defined itself against the attitudes of the president and of the upper classes as well as against the values of their elders. Since the Sixties the upper classes eventually became discredited as moral paragons, their values and manners were altered and conventions reversed.²⁵ This change of conventions was heavily supported by the efforts of the media. For instance, in Oates's "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life over Again," resentment against the values of the upper classes is especially visible in the main heroine's attitude. She can afford to buy expensive things with her parents' money but she rather steals them.

Thirdly, there were civil rights protests of all kinds, but especially important were those of African-Americans against the unequal job opportunities and housing caused by racial discrimination in hiring opportunities, the sale or rental of housing.

There were both violent and non-violent protests, yet as was already suggested, violence in the end became regarded as a form of an anti-establishment outcry where criminality was rationalised. Hannah Arendt warned against the consequences of the violence in her 1969 essay on violence and wrote that "while boycotts, sit-ins, and demonstrations were adequate in eliminating discriminatory laws and ordinances, they proved utter failures and became counter-productive when confronted with social conditions."²⁶ The consequences of violence for Oates's characters can be seen in chapters 5-9 (p.27-48) of this thesis.

²² Paul Johnson 582.

²³ A protest movement by American youth that arose in the late 1960s and faded during the late 1970s.

²⁴ Paul Johnson 557.

²⁵ Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, "A Special Supplement: Reflections on Violence," *The New York Review* 27 Feb 1969.

2.3 Civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests

The framing of the Sixties is based on the Greensboro sit-in that evolved out of the civil rights activities of the 1950s, and the Kent State killings ten years later. Greensboro then represents the hope and energy of the early Sixties, and Kent State the repressions and social disintegration of the late Sixties and early Seventies.²⁷ The protests in the 1970s became more violent including mass protests for civil rights and black power, for liberated education, poor people, women's liberation, gay rights, ethnic rights and protests against the Vietnam War.²⁸

“Did You Ever Slip on Red Blood?” Oates's short story published in *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972) begins with flashbacks of a trial against four men indicted for conspiracy to advocate resistance to induction into the United States Army. Between 1965 and 1975 22500 men were indicted for the violation of draft—law,²⁹ 6800 of them were convicted and 4000 imprisoned.³⁰ The Vietnam War began in 1955³¹ but at the time when Oates published *Marriages and Infidelities*, the process of withdrawal of the US army had already begun. With increasing resentment against the Vietnam War many people became involved in the anti-war policy either by sit-ins or other kinds of protests and with the changes of the draft-laws also those who had been enrolled before became more discontent.

It should not be forgotten that it was also an era of many influential people, be it Martin Luther King, Malcolm X or Gloria Steinem but Oates rarely mentions these persons directly. These people and events mentioned in this chapter have direct influence on the characters: whether it is the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, protests and riots, the threat of a nuclear war or unequal employment opportunities and living conditions of African-Americans, these factors played a role in Oates's short stories and influenced the background on which these stories are based.

²⁷ Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixties Experience: Hard Lessons about Modern America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) 2.

²⁸ Morgan 4.

²⁹ Paul Johnson 633.

³⁰ Paul Johnson 580.

³¹ Even though the United States became fully involved in the war only after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964.

Chapter 3 Literary techniques

3.1 Literary influences

The previous chapter discussed the historical context that is necessary to analyse Oates's short regarding events that surround Oates's protagonists. This chapter describes the literary context and strategies that the author uses in her writings, her style and her literary antecedents.

Oates revealed many influences among the giants of the American literature: admitting affiliation with William Faulkner, Henry Melville, John Updike, H. D. Thoreau and Theodore Dreiser, and, understandably because of her use of psychological realism, of Henry James; but her inspiration reaches even to the classics of European literature, for instance Franz Kafka, James Joyce or Fyodor Dostoevsky, and even to the influences of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche.³² From the American literature of the 20th century one must also remember Flannery O'Connor about whom Oates wrote quite favourably. She was a female writer and a master of short stories and she was depicting the violence around her as well. In "Why is Your Writing So Violent" Oates expressed contempt about the contemporary role of a female writer³³ and stated that female writers can also be concerned with the themes of war, rape, murder and crimes in general, even though they traditionally belong to the domain of male writers.³⁴

Oates herself is very difficult to categorize. Firstly, she is a contemporary writer who belongs to the tradition of female writers writing in the second part of the 20th century. Secondly, she uses techniques that are ascribed to American realism and naturalism but her fiction has been discussed from the perspective of surrealism, the grotesque and the gothic as well.³⁵ Thirdly, as was already suggested, she is a writer who deals with the phenomenon of violence and its consequences. Finally, she is an author of experiments.

The first part of this chapter focuses mainly on the strategies that make Oates "an artist-recorder:"³⁶ That is an artist who is a speaker of his own era and records the events and the atmosphere of the time. This notion entails the most important

³² R.S. Shantarahn, "Joyce Carol Oates – A Novelist with a Mission," *The Indian Review* 1.1 (2005) 4.

³³ It was believed that female writers should not write about violence and unattractive themes.

³⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?"

³⁵ For instance in literary works of Charles Ch. Walcott, Tanya Tromble, Linda W. Wagner, Greg Johnson and others.

³⁶ Wagner 17.

literary stream for Oates's early stories, and that is realism, or to be more precise, psychological realism; and also naturalism. Realism and naturalism form one side of Oates's work, the other employs elements that are not so tightly connected to reality: and these are surrealistic and grotesque elements.

It is Oates's late fiction that is regarded as marked by experiments with subjects and forms, but experiments with the form appear already in her earliest fiction. "Virtually each story is an attempt to do something different," said Oates in one of the interviews in her early writing career.³⁷ Oates's bibliography is vast, and so it is not just realism and naturalism on one side and surrealism and the grotesque on the other. The terms such as the gothic and the stream of consciousness³⁸ also must be introduced. Marginally, there are also elements of fairy-tale and mythic language.³⁹ For instance, *By the North Gate* closely resembles the Faulknerian mythmaking with Eden County representing an allegorical microcosm of humanity and American paradise lost as well.⁴⁰

3.2 Realism

Realism is regarded as the foundation of Oates's early writings. Her earliest fiction has a great portion of a realistic method and she is perceived as an "artist-as-recorder."⁴¹ "An artist that sees herself as a realist, should concern herself with here and now, with everyday events, own environment and with the political, social and other movements of the time."⁴² This definition was echoed by Oates many times in her conviction to be "a serious writer," and Oates proved more than enough that her concern with the contemporary American reality is very strong.

Realism itself is difficult to define. In short, realism is "an accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts."⁴³ C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon liken realism to "fidelity to actuality in its

³⁷ Lee Milazzo, ed. *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1989) 117.

³⁸ Stream of consciousness is a narrative mode defined by William James and later May Sinclair. It describes a method of depicting thoughts and feelings passing through the mind.

³⁹ Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2012) 593.

⁴⁰ Greg Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates's First Collection," *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (1993): 2.

⁴¹ As explained in 3.1 (p. 16) artist-as-recorder is an artist who is a speaker of his own era and records the events and the atmosphere of the time.

⁴² *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2013) 590-591.

⁴³ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) ix.

representation in literature; a term loosely similar with verisimilitude. Realistic writers attempt to depict accurately the world in which they live. Their writings contain accurate descriptions of their characters' speech, social habits, clothing and even their homes and furniture."⁴⁴

Richard Chase in *The American Novel and its Traditions* analysed American realistic fiction focusing more on people's character and their background. Realistic fiction "renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail, it takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life."⁴⁵ The events are usually plausible, characters are more important than action and plot, the characters are very complex and one can see them in connection with nature and with other people, so one can follow their situation regarding their social class and their own past.⁴⁶ This focus on the characters and their lives was essential for Henry James who *In the Art of Fiction* argued that the characters are as important as the plot and who in the same work emphasized the importance of experience in the depiction of reality:

"Experience is never limited and it is never complete, it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue."⁴⁷

The importance of experience is crucial for Oates's use of psychological realism.

3.3 Psychological Realism

"Oates's realism must be understood in terms of unconscious, emotional response rather than as the expression of cold, hard fact."⁴⁸ Oates's realism "is one that seeks to convey real emotions, which she considers to be at once real and incalculable."⁴⁹ It is realism in which all actions are filtered through the main character's eyes. Psychological realism was developed mainly by Henry James as a stream in which "action in the traditional sense is replaced by reflections on reality experienced by

⁴⁴ E. C. Applegate, *American Naturalistic and Realistic Novels* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002) xx.

⁴⁵ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Traditions* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1957) 12.

⁴⁶ Chase 12.

⁴⁷ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine* Sep 4 1884 via <<https://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/artfiction.html>>.

⁴⁸ Tanya Tromble, "Joyce Carol Oates: Fantastic, New Gothic and Inner Realities," *Journal of the Short Story in English* Spring 62 Jun. 2014 via <<https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1443>>.

⁴⁹ Tromble 3.

the central persona.”⁵⁰ Oates in her introduction to *Best American Voices 2003* discussed psychological realism in the following manner:

“By psychological realism we mean, usually, the establishment of a central consciousness through whose perspective a story is narrated or unfolds; our involvement in the story depends largely upon the plausibility and worth of this central consciousness.”⁵¹

Oates usually employs the elements of psychological realism in order to be loyal to the real world but also to be unique. There is also a need of deeper insight into the characters’ behaviour and their feelings to understand their motivation and their urges to act in certain ways.

3.4 Naturalism

Donald Pizer sees naturalism as social realism laced with “the idea of determinism.”⁵² American naturalism is mostly concerned with the notion that natural law and socioeconomic influences are more powerful than the human will.⁵³ Even though this is not so clear-cut in Oates’s writings, there is a certain feeling of determinism. Decisions are usually made by someone or something else and not by one’s free will, especially when it comes to violence. “There is a sense that the characters are victims of forces beyond their control or comprehension. Some of them find violence erupting from their surroundings; others (...) erupt into violence themselves.”⁵⁴ These outside forces influence the behaviour of all Oates’s characters but it is only up to them how they deal with them. If one looks at Oates’s 1965 short story from *Upon the Sweeping Flood* “Norman and the Killer” it is clear how serious these outer influences can be. Norman is a victim of violence and crimes that surround and haunt him, and in the end he is shown as a person who has no power over his actions and cannot control his urge to avenge his dead brother. “Oates often shows people at risk, apparently ordinary characters whose lives are vulnerable

⁵⁰ H.G. Ruthrof, “A Note on Henry James’s Psychological Realism and the Concept of Brevity,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 12.4 (1975) 371.

⁵¹ Joyce Carol Oates, John Kulka and Natalie Danford, eds. *Best New American Voices* (New York: Hartcourt, Inc, 2002) x.

⁵² Donald Pizer, *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) x.

⁵³ Charles Ch. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956) 20.

⁵⁴ Gray 594.

to threats from society or their inner selves, or, more likely, both.”⁵⁵ Oates commented on these threats⁵⁶ in her writings many times. She is concerned with war, rape, murder and other crimes, and her fiction often deals with the phenomenon of violence and its aftermath.⁵⁷

Yet the violence, as much as it is a part of naturalistic tradition, has sometimes in Oates’s fiction “an unreal or surreal quality, almost as if the characters are detached from it.”⁵⁸ The reality that is given to readers is distorted and there is always a distance between the characters and the surrounding actions.

3.5 Surrealism

One of the characteristics of American realistic novel is that it does not portray any abstract, symbolic, supranormal, transcendental or dreamy elements.⁵⁹ These elements are certainly part of Oates’s writings and they would belong to the domain of surrealism. Oates’s style was described by Linda W. Wagner as a chronological progression “from the halting pace of detailed realism to the flurry of surreal speed;”⁶⁰ adding that “the progression is not rigid and hints of Oates’s later styles occurred in her first writings.”⁶¹ The early short stories of Joyce Carol Oates are hardly ever surrealistic. In an interview in 1982 Oates said that she “has become more and more interested in recent years in developing stories that deal with a person’s entire life, with an example of “Daisy” (1978), which deals in a surrealist manner with some of the issues in the relationship between sanity and insanity.”⁶²

None of Oates’s early short stories except for “Daisy” can be described as purely surrealistic but there are stories that include narrative passages which resemble surrealistic techniques. In the original first manifesto of surrealism written in 1924 André Breton wrote that “only imagination realises the possible in me”⁶³ and in the statement he emphasized the themes of madness, hallucinations and illusions.

⁵⁵ Gray 594.

⁵⁶ In this thesis, the threats that Oates presents are mainly connected to Detroit and the de-civilizing process of the 1960s.

⁵⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?”

⁵⁸ Milazzo xiii.

⁵⁹ Chase 13.

⁶⁰ Wagner 15.

⁶¹ Wagner 15.

⁶² Milazzo 117.

⁶³ André Breton, “First Manifesto of Surrealism,” *Project Gutenberg*, Feb 11 2012, Feb 12 2018 <http://uploads.worldlibrary.org/uploads/pdf/20121102214233manifestopdf_pdf.pdf>.

The realistic position on the other hand is for him a disincentive to intellectual and moral progress. It is just feeding on newspaper articles and appeals to the lowest tastes of its readers. According to Breton, this position gives no choice to the reader and it bothers him with unnecessary details and characterizations only in order to “observe.” Breton compares the realistic position to a mania for reducing the unknown to the known, to the classifiable. As he condemns reality, he praises Sigmund Freud and his exploration of dreams and argues that dreams should not be forgotten. What is more, they should be applied to life’s solutions of fundamental questions. Dreams also have a quality of easiness, they mean possibilities not restrictions. He calls for the future resolution of the states of dream and reality, an absolute reality, a surreality.⁶⁴

Oates’s style does not strictly correspond to the principles of surrealism. There is no surrealism in her writings; there are only elements of the original literary stream. In “On Fiction in Fact” Oates discussed the problem of communicating past experience. Certain parts of the essay seem to echo the surrealist attitude, for instance in the following quote: “Language by its very nature tends to distort experience. With the best of intentions, in recalling the past, if even a dream of the previous night, we are already altering – one might say violating - the original experience.”⁶⁵

Surrealists claimed that there is the same quality to both dream and reality. Oates equates “surrealism” with the “elevation” of interior states of the soul to exterior status. She adds that “Literature is not a medium that lends itself well to the surrealist adventure of *disponibilité*. Even radical experimental fiction requires some strategy of causation; otherwise readers won’t trouble to turn pages,”⁶⁶ but she shares the surrealist doubts that language can properly mediate the experience. There is a problem inherent to the realistic depiction of reality; it can describe only that which is seen. For instance the depiction of Detroit becomes very problematic. In the analysed stories Oates experiments with the ways how to mediate the experience because “the surrealist reality of the Detroit ghetto explodes to render fiction impotent, incomprehensible.”⁶⁷ And it is not just Detroit, in “Upon the Sweeping Flood,” taking place in Eden County, the protagonist complains that no one else can

⁶⁴ Breton, “First Manifesto of Surrealism.”

⁶⁵ Tromble 2.

⁶⁶ J.C. Oates, “Inspiration and Obsession in Life and Literature” *The New York Review* 13 Aug 2015.

⁶⁷ Kathleen Burke Bloom, “The Grotesque in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates,” MA Thesis, Loyola University Chicago, 1979, 20 Feb 2018: 63 < https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/3012/>.

understand his actions because they did not live through the same experience. Oates's aim in the stories is to make this experience more accessible and so raw facts are presented along with further inspection of the human mind.

The problem that Oates has to solve when acting as an artist-recorder is the fact that not everything can be solved by the circumstances that can be seen. "She is able to give details about many things that are real and can be explained, but there are also larger forces behind these things that we cannot grasp."⁶⁸ If she only described the obvious, she would act as those whom Breton call vultures preying on newspaper articles and accommodating to the lowest tastes of the public and would give no space to the readers to interpret the stories in their own way.

If one looks at the most famous and most anthologized short story of Oates "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" that is a perfect example of the cooperation between the realistic and surrealistic approach, based on the real event but with many inexplicable features, opening possibilities how to read the story. One of these features is the appearance of Arnold Friend which caused critics to discuss his role in the story, often debating if he is a real person, a fiendish character or just a figment of Connie's imagination. "In (all of) her writing (Oates) is testing the border between the real and the illusory and the space in which these entities converge."⁶⁹ There are further examples of how Oates adopts surrealistic principles mainly in the sixth chapter of this thesis in the analysis of Oates's "The Dead" (p.34).

3.6 The grotesque and the gothic

Oates is sometimes described as using the mythic and fantasy language in order to create gothic effect,⁷⁰ especially in her later stories, e.g. in "Secret Observations on the *Goat-Girl*" from 1988 where a creature half human and half goat comes to a village and by its abnormal existence causes mental decline to one of the characters.⁷¹ "At the same time the world that Oates creates confronts and exposes a demonic aspect that lends itself well to grotesque treatment."⁷² The term grotesque as

⁶⁸ Wagner 16.

⁶⁹ Wagner 17.

⁷⁰ Tromble 2.

⁷¹ Tromble 6-7.

⁷² Burke Bloom 1.

defined by Maria Haar⁷³ presents a deformed or warped character whose physical or mental make-up or behaviour creates a tension in both work and response. The character is usually portrayed with compassion.⁷⁴ For both the gothic and the grotesque there is a central theme of uneasiness connected to the deformed creature.

The term grotesque is sometimes used interchangeably with the term gothic. Both have in common themes of vice and disorder and deviation from harmony and right morals;⁷⁵ and “Oates charts the terrors of the self under threat from a dehumanizing and disintegrating world.”⁷⁶ But while the gothic is set in the unfamiliar world of ghosts, ruined castles and mysteries usually resorting to supernatural elements, the grotesque takes place “in the daylight setting of ordinary communal activity.”⁷⁷ As one of the arguments of this thesis is that all stories have the realistic basis, the topics common for both the grotesque and the gothic will be discussed only from the perspective of the grotesque. The grotesque then plays a big role in distorting the realistic line of the author’s short stories and also attempts to represent the characters’ emotional states.⁷⁸

⁷³ Maria Haar’s definition is applied to the Southern setting but for the purpose of this thesis it is used generally.

⁷⁴ Maria Haar, *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of its Form and Fiction* (Stockholm: Almqvist-Wiksell, 1983) 210.

⁷⁵ Maxmillian E. Novak, “Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 13.1 (1979) 36.

⁷⁶ Douglass H. Thomson, Jack G. Voller and Frederick S. Frank, eds. *Gothic Writers* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002) 304.

⁷⁷ Alan Spiegel, “A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” *The Georgia Review* 26.4. (1972) 433.

⁷⁸ Tromble 3.

Chapter 4 Literary interpretation - A dichotomy of realism and of “the other”

In the following chapters, the use of combined realistic and non-realistic techniques in selected stories is shown: there is realism, naturalism and psychological realism on one hand and surrealism and the grotesque on the other. In 1970 Oates stated: “In the novels I have written, I have tried to give a shape to certain obsessions of mid-century Americans – a confusion of love and money, of the categories of public and private experience, of a demonic urge or an urge to violence as the answer to all problems, an urge to self-annihilation, suicide, the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender.”⁷⁹ It is not just an aim of her novels but of her short stories as well. She aims to shape them with the help of given literary streams and techniques, and with their help also tries to find a way out of this urge to violence of people towards others or oneself. “She is projecting a social vision through which she attempts to dramatize nightmares of her time and to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, move into the future,”⁸⁰ but more often in the selected stories, she presents situations in which the characters cannot succeed.

“Oates charts American history by exploring several geographies: the mythic Eden County, New York (...); Detroit, the monstrous and entangling city; the sterile suburban-intellectual worlds of the upper-middle class north-eastern corridor; and the microcosms of home and body.”⁸¹ The following literary interpretation encompasses all these geographies but does not use the geographical division as the basis of structuring. Each chapter focuses on one complex theme. At the same time each chapter has its principal literary technique that reflects the theme of the chapter. The literary techniques are nevertheless not limited to one chapter. They pervade all chapters in different forms as well.

The fifth chapter presents realistic aspects of stories and represents the basis for all analysed stories regarding the thematic scope. These are themes of struggles to find love and one’s identity, attempts to keep mental and physical health and moral integrity and subjectivity of experience. The next chapter moves from realism to surrealism and marginally presents a few elements of naturalism which are further discussed in the seventh chapter. There “Oates widens her focus beyond the mechanism and stasis of the rural scene in her group of stories concerning atrophied

⁷⁹ Wagner 22.

⁸⁰ Burke Bloom 184.

⁸¹ Douglass H. Thomson 305.

identity among middle-aged and aging men.”⁸² It is the only chapter in which the protagonists are men. The eighth chapter and the ninth chapter show more experimental approaches and focus more on gendered violence and abusive relationships between men and women.

⁸² Mickey Pearlman, ed. *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005) 14.

Chapter 5 Mechanical girls – Isolation, sanity and insanity in “Pastoral Blood” and “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean”

In chapter 3.2 (p.19) an argument was presented that realism renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. Oates’s stories are realistic in essence but they resemble “mimetic transcriptions of experience felt by her characters.”⁸³ That is true for both stories presented in this chapter and it is Oates’s special style that allows this representation. This chapter analyses the short stories from the perspective of isolation of the main characters and also from the perspective of their sanity, which is essential for understanding what these “mimetic transcriptions” stand for and in which form they appear in the texts.

The analysis focuses on two women: Grace and Tessa, who are both trying to escape their lives. Grace is the protagonist of “Pastoral Blood,” a short story from Oates’s first collection of short stories *By the North Gate*. Tessa is the main character of “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” from *The Goddess and Other Women*. It has been already mentioned what is the role of violence in Oates’s stories in the chapter 3.4 on Naturalism (p.20). There are forces – natural, social and sociological – against which Oates’s characters fight and try to endure⁸⁴ and which sometimes force them to commit violence: either violence directed at others or at themselves in the form of self-annihilation. Violence can be a result of these forces but it can also be the cause of such behaviour and therefore characters often move in a circle of violent actions.

The first two stories concern characters that are not successful in enduring these threats of society and whose sanity is questioned because of their experiences. They are examples of characters that become only puppets driven by the forces around them. They perceive the world differently from ordinary people and their feelings and perceptions are mediated to the reader in such a way that he understands how they must feel. Oates achieves this mainly by the use of psychological realism and surrealistic dream-like sequences and shifts the focus of the realistic omniscient narrator to the filtered subjective view of two broken “mechanical girls”.⁸⁵

⁸³ Greg Johnson, “A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates’s First Collection” 1.

⁸⁴ Greg Johnson, “A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates’s First Collection” 4.

⁸⁵ Mechanical girls is a designation for the female characters who have only mechanical interest in the world around them, who look like ordinary people from the outside but inside they live their own life that is not shown on the outside. They can be compared to lifeless puppets with no autonomy, reacting mechanically to the events around them.

5.1 Grace

“Pastoral Blood” occupies a special place in Oates’s first collection. Even though it has the word “pastoral” in the title, contrary to other short stories from the book it is not concerned with pastoral characters that are leading “grim, impoverished lives.”⁸⁶ Grace comes from a good urban family and is soon to be married to another person from the same circles. Each story of *By the North Gate* is about madness, sanity and insanity. In general, Oates’s stories are often “centred on a desire to achieve autonomy or to free oneself of the past (but) these obsessions only result in loss of autonomy, fragmentation and madness.”⁸⁷ Here “Pastoral Blood” fully meets the expectations.

The opening of “Pastoral Blood” presents a girl who has only mechanical interest in her everyday activities. She does not care about her wedding and does not seem to care to live. She doesn’t feel anything reading the death page of the newspaper which seems to have the same weight to her as the ads for getting rid of dandruff. For Grace the scene unfolds as if it were a movie which is very important for the introduction of Oates’s style in these stories. It is offering rich details about Grace’s surroundings but Grace is only observing the scene as if outside of her body. She is a mechanical girl that lives a perfect life, who has perfect body, nice clothes, a nice car and a fiancé to get married to. That is that side of her that is presented to the world. Yet she is emotionally flat inside.

If psychological realism means that “the action is replaced by reflections on reality experienced by the central persona” as described in chapter 3.3(p. 19-20); it is one of the techniques Oates uses in this story. Right in the beginning the narrator says: “How often she had stared down from her window, watching herself running across the lawn.”⁸⁸ Here surrealistic and dream-like scenes reflect her state of mind. In all the key scenes of the story Grace acts as a spectator of her own life and every scene shows her isolation from the events.

All events are told from the perspective of Grace and that is why they seem to be hazy, unrealistic and distanced from the character; exactly in the same way Grace perceives them. It is not difficult to distinguish which actions of the story are real and which are figments of Grace’s imagination. Yet, for the reader “the real” is

⁸⁶ Greg Johnson, “A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates’s First Collection” 4.

⁸⁷ Burke Bloom 182.

⁸⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, *By the North Gate* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1971) 77.

not what is seen from outside (even though there is abundance of realistic details), but what is inside. What is considered to be the truth by the narrator is what is important for the storytelling. Here it is Grace's dissociation from her identity and isolation from the reality.

This is clear for instance in one of the first scenes of the story when Grace is leaving her home and sees her reflection in the store window. She asks "who is this mechanical girl, fleshless yet nicely human, this starrng and beautiful, with perfect body, thick-lashed eyes and coquettish lips."⁸⁹ She does not identify herself with this person that she sees. The true persona is the girl isolated in this body, depressed and indifferent; whose thoughts are expressed by surrealistic elements reflecting her view of the world. Most notably, it can be seen in the scene of Grace's sex (rape) with the man. Grace is bored and apathetic, even though such an extreme action is happening to her: "boredom settled down upon her like a fog. She would have stayed, but resisting was too much trouble."⁹⁰ She stays indifferent, thinking about the past, her family and other experiences that were not so pleasant during her life. She compares this experience to drilling of her teeth and rabies shots. After the act she sobs and vomits, but she does not have strength to repair her make-up and to assume her old role of the perfect girl that she had left behind.

Grace's detachment escalates towards the end of the story when Grace is driving her car after picking up hitchhikers. The scene opens with this sentence: "It must have been the shock of the music that did it, for Grace felt immediately that she was losing her mind, losing her control."⁹¹ Then everything happens as if in a dream, in a quick succession of actions. The hitchhikers are shouting; the man is pulling out a knife while her mind is drifting again to her family. It ends with the car smashing into the fence. The next sentence is only: "Excitement."⁹² From then on, many quick successive images follow that are removed from the physical objective reality:

"The dark man's chair teetered, he threshed about wildly, he fell over. Laughter. Grace watched him fall but did not laugh, her attention shifted elsewhere. A wind from outside. Night."⁹³

⁸⁹ Oates, *By the North Gate* 78.

⁹⁰ Oates, *By the North Gate* 85.

⁹¹ Oates, *By the North Gate* 88.

⁹² Oates, *By the North Gate* 89.

⁹³ Oates, *By the North Gate* 90.

There is a final scene where Grace is watching herself and her family from the mirror – watching the people with labels: the mother, the brother, the Fiancé, ending again with the scene moving into the distance. Oates ends the story with Grace's decision not to commit suicide but to try an adventure like this again.

It was suggested that Oates's characters want to endure natural, social and sociological forces. Grace does not want to endure; she wants to be devoured by them in order to feel something. In comparison with the beginning of the story there is a sense of determinism. Grace's fate was decided by the outer forces and she is not able to resist them, attempting her self-annihilation.⁹⁴

In order to understand Grace and her intentions, it is necessary to include one quote by Oates: "I am always or usually writing about real people in real society, but the means of expression may be naturalistic, surreal, or parodic. In this way I have, to my own satisfaction at least, solved the old problem - should one be faithful to the real world, or to one's imagination."⁹⁵

There is another aspect of the story that makes Grace's intentions and behaviour realistic from the perspective of the time of the story's release. As stated in chapter 2.2 (p. 13-14) the 1960s saw a complete revolution in the field of values and priorities of the youth. *By the North Gate* "investigates women's experience in a patriarchal mid-twentieth-century culture that conformed to long-standing social, religious, and family models; and it suggests the moral vacuum at the heart of such "sacred" American institutions as the law and academe."⁹⁶ Grace's escape can be an attempt to dismiss the values of the upper classes and of her family. She is attracted to things that have nothing in common with the purity and perfection of the mechanical girl: the cheap women's store, country towns with squalid pubs, bathrooms with rusty faucets and Grace's desire in general to become someone else. The part of this escape is also travelling with "the man." He has no name. He is always just "a man" as opposed to Grace's fiancé Tom. Some critics have criticized Oates's earliest stories for a lack of action or meaning.⁹⁷ The meaning of the story

⁹⁴ This approach partially echoes naturalistic techniques, but not so conspicuously as in other stories selected for further analysis: e.g. "Norman and the Killer" and "Upon the Sweeping Flood."

⁹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 6.

⁹⁶ Greg Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates's First Collection" 11 – 12.

⁹⁷ Greg Johnson, "A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates's First Collection" 9.

lies in what Harold Bloom called “empathy with the insulted and injured.”⁹⁸ And identification with the broken characters, achieved by Oates’s special narrative techniques, is also evident in the next chapter.

5.2 Tessa

By the North Gate can be viewed as a microcosm of Joyce Carol Oates’s entire career in fiction,”⁹⁹ and many parts of the collection are echoed in her later stories. “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” from *The Goddess and Other Women* is a spiritual successor to “Pastoral Blood” regarding the empathy with the insulted and the injured. It is not a story that is anthologized or analysed frequently. In fact it is rather overlooked in favour of Oates’s other stories from the 1970s: especially of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Tessa is also a mechanical girl, sleeping, waking, and living in the body of Tessa Hunt, unable to get out of it. Similar to Grace, she also leaves everything behind but not by her own choice. Grace’s sanity is doubted because she leaves her seemingly perfect life and plunges into dangerous and unstable events. Tessa’s sanity is questioned because of some traumatic events. If Grace is the character that is devoured by the forces, Tessa is the one who was devoured by them and led to the breaking point, but now tries to escape them. She says repeatedly that “now she was not in love. She had become indestructible.”¹⁰⁰ Love, or some kind of perverted love, is what led her to the breaking point.

“Like the work of her literary and philosophical mentors, Oates’s earliest stories view love as a violent force through which individuals strive for power and ironically reinforce their own isolation.”¹⁰¹ One of these mentors would be Nietzsche and his *The Will to Power* in which he says: “There is nothing to life that has value, except the degree of power – assuming that life itself is the will to power.”¹⁰² Tessa, to a certain extent adopts this kind of perverted love as her relationships resemble complicated power struggles. Tessa’s violent struggle for “love” can be seen especially in her treatment of the stray cat.

⁹⁸ Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 1-6.

⁹⁹ Greg Johnson, “A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates’s First Collection” 1.

¹⁰⁰ Oates, “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean,” *The Falcon* 4 (1972) 63.

¹⁰¹ Greg Johnson, “A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates’s First Collection” 1.

¹⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 2011) 37.

“Moving suddenly, Tessa snatched the cat up in her arms. It began to fight at once. It snarled and clawed at her, raking her wrists, the backs of her fans, (...) yet she could not release the cat.”¹⁰³

This is an example of a relationship in which Tessa is the one in power, even though hurting herself, but not all her relationships are modelled in this manner. In her previous relationship it was her who was the submissive part of the pair, the victim. In general, all her relationships lack reciprocity and cause her pain. This twisted kind of love caused Tessa many problems as she possibly suffers from PTSD. She has auditory and visual hallucinations; she has moments of tiredness and moments of activity and she lives in a strange state of her life cut off from her past. “Nineteen was the oldest age she could remember, it was a limit to her imagination, an end, and she must be nineteen.”¹⁰⁴

Her past is not gone completely though. The present is mingling with her memories of Peter V and her “friends” and family. Some of them reflect reality, some of them are mere hallucinations; and some of these “memories” are only pictures and shapes. Similarly as in Grace’s case, Tessa’s world is described highly subjectively, the narrative is often a mixture of present events and Tessa’s memories.

Also, what is outside of Tessa’s mind is subjected to her perception. The surroundings of the house, the beach and the ocean are described in a series of impressions, isolated from the civilization: “Outside, the landscape was misty, dream-like as if lazily imagined (...) Tessa felt that they had driven a great distance and that it would be difficult for anyone to get to her, now;”¹⁰⁵ symbolizing her physical and also mental distance. It is “the dream verbalized”¹⁰⁶ and suggested surrealism.

The inside of the room is very different from the outside. It is more credible and the style changes to show the difference between danger outside and safety inside. “The furniture in this room was comfortable, splotched red and yellow, very cheerful. The cheerfulness was heavy. It hung down from the windows – yellow drapes- it hung down from above the big stone fireplace, an abstract painting in red

¹⁰³ Oates, “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” 67.

¹⁰⁴ Oates, “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” 53.

¹⁰⁵ Oates, “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” 51.

¹⁰⁶ Blanche H. Gelfant and Lawrence Graver, *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 404.

and gold.”¹⁰⁷ In this part of the text, the environment is adjusted to the feelings of the protagonist and the whole story in general shows frequent usage of psychological realism.

“For Oates, psychological realism involves recounting a story from the rational view of a coherent (realistic, because believable) personality, meaning that developing the unconscious depths of the characters is as important as positing them in an authentic and believable exterior world.”¹⁰⁸ These were two examples of realistic characters in the sense of an accurate representation and an exploration of American lives produced mainly with the techniques of realism, psychological realism and marginally of surrealism. The next chapter focuses more on surrealistic devices.

¹⁰⁷ Oates, “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean,” 64.

¹⁰⁸ Tromble 3.

Chapter 6 Detroit interlude – Love, trance and paradoxes in “The Dead”

The story of Ilena, the protagonist of “The Dead” from *Marriages and Infidelities* is in many things similar to Grace and Tessa but unlike the mechanical girls Ilena is already a grown up independent woman with her own career and sense of achievement in her life. Her pursuit of love is analysed in a separate chapter which should be perceived as a transition between chapter five “Mechanical Girls” and chapter seven “Powerless Heroes.” It grows from the pursuit of love of the first chapter and shares its concern with “mimetic transcriptions” but serves as an introduction to social and natural forces that become essential for the characters in the latter chapter. There is also a diminishing power of realism in the story and a growing influence of surrealistic techniques.

6.1 Ilena

Ilena’s latest work is a series of short stories in honour of certain dead writers with whom she felt a kinship. “The Dead” is homage to James Joyce and *Marriages and Infidelities* is Oates’s expression of respect for her predecessors and favourites. The story is one of Oates’ most visible “Detroit stories.” Oates called Detroit “The quintessential American city” but also mentioned its other names: Motor City, U.S.A. and Murder City, U.S.A.¹⁰⁹ and she could not list the many stories in the collections *The Wheel of Love, Marriages and Infidelities* and *The Goddess* that would have been unimaginable without Detroit.¹¹⁰

The surrealistic atmosphere of “The Dead” is induced by mood elevating pills that cause hallucinations and a dreamy, trance state of the protagonist. Similarly as with the mechanical girls, the narrative is subdued to the character as the events are filtered through Ilena’s dazed drug-numbing state of mind; and the story in some places even resembles narratives of the Beat Generation, as they drift through their everyday life trying to forget about the world around them. Ilena’s reason for avoiding the reality of everyday life is explained in the following manner: “Since the decline of her marriage, a few years ago, Ilena thought it wisest to avoid complete mental alertness. That was an overrated American virtue.”¹¹¹

Ilena is trying to escape the hostile reality of two violent cities: New York

¹⁰⁹ Oates, “Visions of Detroit” 309.

¹¹⁰ Oates, “Visions of Detroit” 311.

¹¹¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *High Lonesome* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007) 373.

and Detroit whose atmosphere of fear and excitement was described in chapter 2.1 (p.13). “The Dead” is a university short story taking place in New York of angry politicians and police prowling the university campus in search of troublesome students: “The troublesome students hid in the bushes alongside buildings, eager to plant their homemade time bombs and run; so the campus was not safe for ordinary students or ordinary people.”¹¹² The narrator mentions cancelled classes and police harassment. On the other hand the university is a place for discussion about various subjects: Vietnam, the oppression of African Americans, religious hypocrisy or censorship. This image of university campus resembles the very atmosphere of the early 1970s. It is a dangerous place of “turmoil of excitement,” which is vibrant and alive, a place of both headless violence and rational discussions. “Oates’s use of Detroit places her in the tradition of writers for whom the city is an ambivalent and powerful force.”¹¹³

Ilena used to live in Detroit but left the city before the Detroit riots. The personal history of Ilena and the history of the city are always intertwined as Ilena sees the riots as “a cataclysmic flowering of their (her and her husband) own hatred”¹¹⁴ and the atmosphere of the cities reflect her own personal struggles with her husband and lovers. She is a successful woman in the men’s world and as a part of the women’s liberation movement she symbolizes struggles of all successful women who are punished for their achievements. Supposedly, her ex-husband was jealous of her publishing success and that’s why he hated her. Her pursuit of love begins as revenge to her husband but she has troubles with relationships in general. Even the physical relationships seem to her common. Having sexual relationships with people is compared to shaking hands.

“Domestic realism” seen in the previous chapters plays no role here; there are no descriptions of the house or the university rooms. There are some descriptions of the characters but they do not play a major role in the realistic processing. All male characters are clearly defined. Ilena’s husband Bryan Donohue is tall, abrupt, self-centred but amusing, an instructor in radiology, interested in jazz and sociology. Ilena’s lover Gordon is gentle and paternal with tense-apologetic smile. Ilena’s student Emmett Norlan is handsome, with fizzy hair, beard and heavy glasses that made marks on sides of his nose; and there is a head of her department, a middle-

¹¹² Oates, *High Lonesome* 374-375.

¹¹³ Douglass H. Thomson 305.

¹¹⁴ Oates, *High Lonesome* 377.

aged priest, neat, greying, gentlemanly, but a little corrupt in his academic standards, whose Harvard years had been eclipsed by the stern daily realities of Detroit.

Realism in “The Dead” stems mainly from referencing the reality of the 1970s. The events of the two decades anchor the narrative firmly in reality; and there are also more personal events. One of the events that shake Ilena is the death of her student Emmett, and her visits to the doctor are also part of the reality check. The side effects of the pills stand out in italics; but Ilena’s mind is drifting somewhere else. There are also allusions to other literary works e.g. *Heart of Darkness*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and Ilena’s fictional work *Death Dance*.

Unseen forces of society play a major role here. Ilena cannot sleep because of money, her notoriety and dreams about the assassination of J.F. Kennedy. She thinks that she is worn out by the love and the air of Detroit and its factories. She struggles to escape these conditions with the use of pills and as she cannot run away, the sole safe place is when she is alone isolated from the outside world: “in her car she feels safe from the noxious street fumes and the eyes of the police.”¹¹⁵

Ilena’s situation is very unique. She is dreaming during the day with the help of the pills but is not able to dream “genuinely” because of the same effect of the pills. Every day takes place in “surreality” which can be threatening and liberating at the same time. The drugs can cause fatigue and intense rage, increase and decrease in libido, they are making her attractive and young but also they are destroying her health and her femininity: her menstruation stops even though she is still young.

One of the most important scenes takes place at the end of the story when Ilena is coming back to Detroit and all her lovers merge in her mind along with her dead student Emmett.

“When she was with Lyle she thought back to Gordon....now, with Gordon, she thought back to someone else, someone else, half-remembered, indistinct, perhaps dead...He began to make love to her.”¹¹⁶

Then her mind goes back to Bryan, her ex-husband and then

“her mind gave way to a sharper thought and she saw Emmett’s face: his scorn, his disapproval. She stifled a scream.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Oates, High Lonesome 375.

¹¹⁶ Oates, High Lonesome 403

The end of story offers no resolution, only numbness and deadness. Ilena's mind is liberated in the surrealistic tradition, she is able to wander in her thoughts and look for an answer but she is not able to focus and reach the truth, and she is left with the sense of betrayal, fading and dying. Surrealism here means an escape from the world but no absolution. Ilena is in the end helpless and left alone.

¹¹⁷ Oates, High Lonesome 403.

Chapter 7 Powerless heroes – violence, impotence and survival in “Upon the Sweeping Flood” and “Norman and the Killer”

Helplessness is also one of the themes analysed in this chapter. It discusses the themes of heroism, impotence and determinism. Its main focus lies on the threats of natural, social and sociological forces. In general, the chapter examines the relationship between the natural law, socioeconomic influences and the human will, the features essential for naturalism. In the previous chapters we saw how people succumb to these external forces; here we can see how people, in search of an escape route from these forces, commit violence. With this focus two short stories from *Upon the Sweeping Flood* published in 1966 are analysed: “Upon the Sweeping Flood” and “Norman and the Killer.” In both stories the protagonists commit violent acts as results of external pressure: once as a result of a natural disaster, once due to a crime committed in the past. These events anchor the story in reality and represent naturalistic forces. On the other hand, both men, Stuart and Norman, are mentally detached from the actions and both stories have a vague sense of time. Overall, the stories portray “a modern world lacking structure and coherence seething with vibrant, uncontrolled energies.”¹¹⁸ This is the only chapter that deals with male protagonists and they are “marked by a sense of lost opportunities, careers and families blunted and stifled by dimly perceived earlier choices in their lives.”¹¹⁹

7.1 Stuart

“Upon the Sweeping Flood” is a short story that takes readers back to Eden County. Its main theme revolves around a human character under the pressure of natural forces. Natural forces play a double role in the story: as a representation of the power of nature and human insignificance in the face of nature; and as an allegory of social forces in the form of expectations of society put on Walter Stuart. When Stuart sets out to rescue the city before the storm, he acts with a purpose of defying the sense of incompleteness in his life. What may look like an act of heroism is in fact an act of a desperate man and what begins as a story of heroism soon turns into a fierce struggle of survival.

¹¹⁸ Greg Johnson, “Out of Eden: Oates’s ‘Upon the Sweeping Flood,’” *The Midwest Quarterly* 30.1 (1993) via <<https://www.gale.com/uk/c/literature-resource-center>>.

¹¹⁹ Pearlman 14.

In the end Stuart comes into realization that the night of the flood had poisoned him. Stuart's last words to the rescuers after the flood: "Save me! Save me!"¹²⁰ apply to his need of rescue from the storm as such but from its oppressive atmosphere and sins he committed as well. Stuart becomes "the book's most poignant example of the self-delusion and spiritual blindness by which human beings seek to impose meaning upon a world of sweeping indifference and ceaseless turmoil."¹²¹

The question of free will is one of the principal themes of the story. Stuart rushing to the rescue of people hit by the storm is a person driven by forces beyond his control. Even though he repeats: "I know what I'm doing;"¹²² the reader is under the impression that the truth is exactly the opposite. From the first scenes of the story the main character seems like a puppet that is not able to make its own decisions. That is done with the combination of naturalistic writing techniques and allusions created by the mythic language. The mythic language is perhaps the more visible feature of the two, evident already in the title of the story and in the setting of Eden County. Greg Johnson suggests that the insidious nature of the drowning Eden is suggested by the snakes that "gleamed wetly in the morning light, heads together as if conspiring."¹²³

The whole story is about a power struggle between the man and the nature and also between three individuals trying to survive under extreme conditions. Unlike in previous stories, this piece of writing presents a new perspective on personal narration as the final paragraphs of the story show that Stuart's experience is incommunicable. The night of the flood of Biblical magnitude is described as an event that no one else can understand and no one can easily believe. The role of the Biblical allusions in this story can be easily explained by Oates's response to the influence of religion in her work:

"I think of religion as a kind of psychological manifestation of deep powers, deep imaginative, mysterious powers which are always with us. And what has been in the past called supernatural, I would prefer simply to call natural. However, though these

¹²⁰ Oates, *High Lonesome* 212.

¹²¹ Greg Johnson, "Out of Eden: Oates's 'Upon the Sweeping Flood.'"

¹²² Oates, *High Lonesome* 197.

¹²³ Greg Johnson, "Out of Eden: Oates's 'Upon the Sweeping Flood.'"

things are natural, they are still inaccessible and cannot be understood, cannot be controlled."¹²⁴

The language itself is not able to describe the trauma caused by the flood. "The insistence on the problematic nature of language recalls the work of another philosopher alluded to by Oates, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who believed that our difficulty in deciphering the world around us is intricately related to our problematic understanding of the workings and limits of language."¹²⁵

Stuart's incommunicable experience is humiliation and pain he suffered during the night of the flood. The flood reveals his weaknesses and his insecurity and the boy and the girl are witnesses of this fragility. The girl has to hold him in her arms because he cannot keep his sanity. The two characters are the only two people who share his experience and he has to eliminate them to wipe out his humiliation. There is a constant power struggle between Stuart and the boy who in a Nietzschean sense threatens his masculinity. That is at first seen in the struggle with the horse, then when the boy seizes an axe, the only tool of power in the sinking house, and finally in the fight against the snakes and consequently between the man and the boy.

Stuart would like to think that his mind and his reason is what keeps him save from the natural forces.

"He liked to think that his mind was a clear, sane circle of quiet carefully preserved inside the chaos of the storm – that the three of them were safe within the sanctity of this circle; this was how man always conquered nature, how he subdued things greater than himself."¹²⁶

In reality he is not able to preserve his sanity. He fails to fulfil the role of the hero and he is the children's saviour as well as they are his. The flood represents his repressed internal chaos that eventually drives him into murder and madness.¹²⁷ This story presents a few of Oates's essential themes: principally the frailty of human personality, illusion of safety within a chaotic world and indifference of nature.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Greg Johnson, "Out of Eden: Oates's 'Upon the Sweeping Flood.'"

¹²⁵ Tromble 2.

¹²⁶ Oates, *High Lonesome* 205.

¹²⁷ Greg Johnson, "Out of Eden: Oates's 'Upon the Sweeping Flood.'"

¹²⁸ Greg Johnson, "Out of Eden: Oates's 'Upon the Sweeping Flood.'"

7.2 Norman

“A typical ‘Oates novel’ takes an act of violence as a starting point from which to explore the effects of violence on her characters’ lives as they struggle to develop coping strategies or strategies of survival.”¹²⁹ Norman, the protagonist of “Norman and the Killer,” has the same sense of helplessness as Stuart. His impotence is not caused by a natural disaster but by the brutal killing of his brother that he could not prevent. Norman himself has no desire to take part in “unusual channels of life” including accidents or disasters. He is described as a gentle and shy man who distances himself from the heroes he reads about as they tell him nothing about himself.

One of the first mentions of violence is (not so surprisingly) connected to love: “his love for this woman (...) was so absurdly great as to overwhelm him, threaten him with an obscure, inexplicable violence”¹³⁰ and refers to Stuart’s love for his girlfriend Ellen. The fulfilling of this relationship is stifled by the violence of a different kind: “it is in the newspapers every they how they kill people and walk out, nothing ever happens, nobody gets punished, nothing gets put right and people like myself have to live under the shadow of it.”¹³¹ Ellen represents a bright future. She looks young and clean¹³² and wants to forget about her past. Norman wants to reach to her and embrace her but he seems to misinterpret her behaviour and in his treatment of her he feels helpless as if there was something stronger than him that is pulling him from her. Even the beginning of the story, which is not yet corrupted by the remembered violence, resembles a dream. Norman contemplates how he cannot believe that Ellen, his girlfriend is there with him as she seems too perfect to be real.

Norman’s turn to violence is not spontaneous as Stuart’s eruption of violence in “Upon the Sweeping Flood” but it seems liberating. It is a quest of searching for the truth and justice and at the same time a witch hunt based on despair. He has given up his girlfriend just to come after this man, he sacrificed his happiness and this traumatic event is what stands between him and his fulfilled life. Norman feels that he has to ruin himself in order to rectify the violent deed and to win his justice,

¹²⁹ Suzanne Bray and Gérald Préher, *Fatal Fascinations* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) 72.

¹³⁰ Oates, *Upon the Sweeping Flood* 126.

¹³¹ Oates, *Upon the Sweeping Flood* 149.

¹³² As opposed to the man whom Norman blames from killing his brother and who is described as dirty, representing Norman’s past.

similarly as in some tribes who practiced blood revenge. As he cannot achieve justice he cannot feel safe again.

As opposed to the film that Norman saw at the theatre with his brother, the reality is banal and unimaginative and he feels that he cannot respond to it. After the encounter with the supposed killer he is completely cut-off from reality. In front of his eyes a film is unfolding with the event from his childhood - two faces remain blurred but the third one after the confrontation with the man at the gas station becomes clear. As memories are not reliable sources of events, he believes in what he wants to believe and his actions are led by delusions. He is detached from the real life not able to relate to it and also detached from the violence, developing his own coping strategy. The distance between the violence and Norman himself is also divided linguistically – when Norman encounters the attackers for the first time and is thrown into the water both parties are divided by the barrier of water and the space above the water has a different language from Norman himself.

Oates also employs features of experiments with time: “Norman was really not conscious of time passing; he might have been enchanted.”¹³³ The night spent with the killer passed quickly for him and he does not realize how the time passes. Time is subjected to human perception, in this case to the perception of a man turned mad. As Virginia Woolf writes in *Orlando*: “An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second.”¹³⁴ Time as a narrative strategy becomes more important in the ninth chapter of this thesis (p.46) where experiments with time function as an inherent part of the chaos of human mind.

¹³³ Oates, *Upon the Sweeping Flood* 144.

¹³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 94-95.

Chapter 8 Masks, dreams and nightmares in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Thematically, the stories in the eighth and the ninth chapter form one whole. Both are narratives of girls trapped in complicated intergenerational and interpersonal (man-woman) relationships. They scrutinize their parents' values and eventually find themselves in contact with violent predatory men. Male power is the dominant force found in both examples. The stories are divided into two separate chapters because of their use of different literary techniques. For “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been” the essential technique is that of the grotesque; whereas “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections” draws mainly from experiments with time and linearity.

8.1 Connie

We began chapter 5 (p.26) with the analysis of Grace's dismissal of the values of her family and by extension of the upper classes. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” shows visible signs of the same renunciation. The protagonist of the story, Connie, thinks her mother simple and even denounces her with the words: “She makes me want to throw up sometimes.”¹³⁵ Their dialogues resemble meaningless power struggles as they “kept up a pretense of exasperation, a sense that they were tugging and struggling over something of little value to either of them.”¹³⁶ Their relationship is defined on the basis of beauty, jealousy and rivalry. Connie has a sister who is praised by the mother as she helps around the house and as opposed to Connie she does not waste her time daydreaming.

Connie's story is a narrative of growing up and finding one's identity by defying the values of her parents and by accepting her identity as a grown up woman but:

“In her attempt to achieve her vision of ideal womanhood via the attainment of what her imagination defines as romantic love, Connie, like many female protagonists of

¹³⁵ Oates, *High Lonesome* 250.

¹³⁶ Oates, *High Lonesome* 253.

Oates' fictive world, instead merely places herself in the role of passive victim at the hands of a much-older man.”¹³⁷

This interpretation of the passive victim is nevertheless distorted by the grotesque and surrealistic elements which offer multiple interpretations and ambiguity. The grotesque elements, deviation from harmony and morals are frequently shown in the story, especially concerning Arnold Friend. Everything about him seems half real and dated as if he were an image taken from the past that does not fit into the present scope. He was inspired by Charles Schmid, an American murderer convicted of murdering three teenage girls, who, similarly to Arnold Friend dressed in order to fit among the young people¹³⁸ but the character's appearance is described in the grotesque manner. He has shabby and shaggy black hair that look crazy like a wig, long hawk like nose, eyes like chips of broken glass, tight shirt, tight jeans and greasy leather boots; but all these things for Connie did not come together. His voice is changing, he is talking loudly for a while and then he switches to talking like a radio. “His whole face was a mask (...) tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered makeup on his face but had forgotten about his throat.”¹³⁹ His appearance of a smashing young teenager and Connie's possible image of an ideal man is all counterfeit.

This story “tends to stick in the memory for its hauntingly surreal suggestions of horrifying violence and characters whose extreme natures separate them from the relatively mundane inhabitants of realism.”¹⁴⁰ The grotesque in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is combined with surrealistic elements that create a possibility of multiple interpretations. The grotesque and surrealism are two literary techniques that are inseparable in the story. From the perspective of surrealism, the most interesting theory concerns the whole event as a result of nightmare born from daydreaming in the sun.

“Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her (...) and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with

¹³⁷ Elizabeth MacInnes De Nittis, “Gender and the Grotesque in the Short Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates” (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2008) 18.

¹³⁸ De Nittis 13.

¹³⁹ Oates, *High Lonesome* 261.

¹⁴⁰ De Nittis 18.

the night before (...) and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was.”¹⁴¹

The grotesque elements, which we interpreted as embodied in Arnold’s appearance, are enclosed in the surrealistic setting. The elements that seem grotesque may be perceived as surrealistic because they are in a dream where everything is twisted and illogical. As in a dream, Connie comes into a place that should be familiar to her but she does not recognize it. ”The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but that wasn’t good enough, wasn’t going to help her.”¹⁴² The interpretation is clearly ambivalent, the surrealistic parts can be part of the dream or they can be a response to the traumatic event. Detachment of the character from the events discussed in the previous chapters also appears here but this time it is even more disconcerting.

“She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she was back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited.”¹⁴³

Greg Johnson described this story as well as the story analysed in the next chapter as narratives in which “healthy young girls endure violent confrontations with rapacious male power, (where) the girls are destroyed by psychopathic exertions of masculine will.”¹⁴⁴ The gender perspective is very important for the interpretation,¹⁴⁵ and looking back at the analysed stories the same masculine will (in a modified fashion) appears also in “Pastoral Blood” and in “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean.”

¹⁴¹ Oates, *High Lonesome* 253.

¹⁴² Oates, *High Lonesome* 262.

¹⁴³ Oates, *High Lonesome* 266.

¹⁴⁴ Greg Johnson, “Early Feminism,” *Short Story Criticism* 121 (1994) via

<<https://www.gale.com/uk/c/literature-resource-center>>.

¹⁴⁵ For more information see the work of Johana Lajdová, “Dangerous Crossing: The Gendered Grotesque in the Selected Stories of Joyce Carol Oates” (Univerzita Karlova v Praze, 2016).

Chapter 9 Experiments with time and non-linear narration in “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections, and Began My Life Over Again”

The second part of the stories concerning male power as the dominant force focuses on “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections, and Began My Life Over Again.” The full title of this story¹⁴⁶ symbolizes a synthesis of two spheres and principles that were analysed in the previous chapters. There are “the abstractions of contemplation, revelation, the meaning of life and beginning life over again; and also the tangibility of the Detroit House of Corrections and an English class at Baldwin Country Day School.”¹⁴⁷ This final interpretative chapter serves as a reminder of the dichotomy that appeared in the analysis of the previous stories and as a summary of key motifs.

9.1 The girl

The second Detroit story and the most experimental story from our selection is “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections and Began My Life Over Again.” The narrative is presented through a series of notes for an essay divided into 12 uneven parts revolving around the events and characters important for the story along with Detroit. The most important entry for the events is named “World events” and contains only one word: “nothing.” These notes are not arranged in chronological order, and the story itself is conceived as a series of images featuring “the girl,” which are often incomplete and fragmented. This narrative is often repetitive and disjointed and as such it is indicative of the state of mind of the sixteen-year-old protagonist who is trying to make order in the senseless chaos.¹⁴⁸

The whole story is unfolding through the technique of stream of consciousness and there is the dynamic of the narration which sometimes oscillates between the 1st person and the 3rd person narrative. The content of the narrative itself is realistic. It alternates between the factual episodes e.g. the description of Detroit weather, its streets or the girl’s house; and of more personal incidents. One part for

¹⁴⁶ “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections and Began my Life Over Again: 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...”

¹⁴⁷ Sue Simpson Park, “A Study in Counterpoint: Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘How I Contemplated the World from the House of Correction and Began my Life Over Again,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 22.2 (1976)

¹⁴⁸ Park 224.

instance follows the girl's thrill after stealing a pair of gloves. One can see that she "wanted to steal not to buy."¹⁴⁹ Another part of the story suggests that the girl was trying to get her father's attention, because as a busy man he was neglecting her.

"How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections, and Began My Life Over Again" is the only story from our selection which concerns a nameless character. There is a visible dichotomy between two groups of characters. Some have names; some are nameless; only their position in the girl's family is designated: the girl, the mother, the father. Sue Simpson Park highlighted a few contrasts and paradoxes:¹⁵⁰ one of these paradoxes is reflected in relations between the members of the groups. The first contrast is between the mother and Clarita. The mother is a typical representative of the American upper class, a member of the athletic and golf clubs. Clarita is a prostitute from the street, in ordinary clothes; her only education comes from watching TV imagining lives she might have led.

The second contrast can be seen between Simon, Clarita and the girl's lover, and the father. Park designates Simon as "a parasite living off women,"¹⁵¹ the girl's father on the other hand is a distinguished gentleman who nevertheless does not devote his time to his daughter. Due to the neglect from the father's side and denunciation of values of both of the girl's parents, Clarita and Simon can be understood as substitute parents¹⁵² whose world of the centre of Detroit seems warm even though it is destructive.

The last contrast that should be mentioned is a clear difference between the clean suburban life of the girl and the squalid world of downtown Detroit where even the places like pawn shops are perceived as something never encountered before in the clean world of Bloomfield Hills. The Detroit street world is at first hostile and cold to the girl, it is a world of filthiness, drugs and danger but it is the only place that shows her some kind of welcome and love. Eventually, the girl is betrayed by this world and sent to the house of corrections where she is given a chance to contemplate her life and appreciate the life at Bloomfield Hills. Yet when all the facts are assembled through the complicated narrative, it becomes clear that "Bloomfield Hills and Detroit, different as they are, are really two sides of one coin

¹⁴⁹ Oates, *High Lonesome* 274.

¹⁵⁰ Park 217-224.

¹⁵¹ Park 219.

¹⁵² Park 220.

of insecurity and potential violence.”¹⁵³ When the girl comes back to the place that should be safe for her (house of corrections) she is beaten in the same manner she could be beaten in the streets.

The first impression from the narrative suggests that the notes should provide space to contemplate life and detach oneself from the violence and from all that is bad in Detroit. Yet the second impression is more pessimistic. There is visible uncertainty and hesitance in the girl’s notes as she tries to convince herself that this is the right place for her. “I will never leave home again. Never.”¹⁵⁴ And then: I will never leave home this is my home I love everything here.”¹⁵⁵ The whole story has no clear resolution but serves again as a “mimetic transcription” of the girl’s feelings and her attempt to make sense of the world and of the chaos presented by both of the worlds she had been living in.

Similarly as in other analysed stories, the pursuit of love is one of the strong themes of the story. The relationship between the girl and Simon is very similar to the one in “The Girl at the End of the Ocean” between Tessa and Peter V. It is abusive and violent, and in accordance with the previous chapter, it is another example of a girl being destroyed by psychopathic exertions of masculine will, this time by a masculine will under the influence of drugs. The story also echoes other motifs mentioned in chapters 5-8 (p. 26-44): isolation (of the correction centre), renounced values of the upper classes and rivalry between a mother and a daughter, imagery of Detroit as a violent city, drugs and pressures created by society. The story integrates a great variety of motifs symptomatic of Oates.

¹⁵³ Park 217.

¹⁵⁴ Oates, High Lonesome 282.

¹⁵⁵ Oates, High Lonesome 283.

Chapter 10 Conclusion: Violence as a means of communication

In the previous chapters we analysed the occurrence of literary devices of realism, naturalism, surrealism, the grotesque and other experiments with the language. The very first story “Pastoral Blood” served as an example of realism. It was published in Oates’s first collection *By the North Gate* in 1963. “The Dead” was presented as the most surrealistic story in our selection. It is a story that appeared in *Marriages and Infidelities* in 1972. With the exception of “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” published in 1974 in *The Goddess and Other Women*, the selected stories follow a chronological development from more realistic and naturalistic ones to more experimental ones.

There is the above mentioned “Pastoral Blood” as a representative of prevailing realistic techniques and “Norman and the Killer and “Upon the Sweeping Flood” standing for the naturalistic techniques in *Upon the Sweeping Flood* from 1966; all three stories were published in the 1960s. From the 1970s there is the grotesque “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” and the most experimental story “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections, and Began My Life Over Again,” both from the 1970 collection *The Wheel of Love*. And there is the aforementioned surrealistic “The Dead” from the 1972 collection *Marriages and Infidelities*. With the exception of “The Dead” that served as an interlude between the chapters, the whole literary interpretation followed a simple design of progressing from “the halting pace of detailed realism to the flurry of surreal speed” (p.21).

The chronological viewpoint is one way how to look at the representation of literary techniques. The second perspective follows all dysfunctional relationships in the presented stories. There is no relationship presented in the selection that is fully functional. Intergenerational relationships are not perfect but they are more functional than those between men and women. For instance in “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean” it is Tessa’s aunt who is taking her from the abusive relationship. In the same story we can notice that there is a good connection between the two women but when it comes to Tessa’s father, the relationship is twisted by hallucinations. Tessa’s and “the girl’s” fathers are both busy men having only a marginal role in the narratives. In other stories the fathers are basically absent (“Pastoral Blood,” “The Dead,” “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”).

If we look at the relationships between the men and the women, there is always violence that makes dysfunctional relationships possible. There are predatory men in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” “A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean,” “Pastoral Blood,” “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections, and Began My Life Over Again” and “Upon the Sweeping Flood.” Oates’s stories often feature these violent relationships and the author sometimes deliberately plays with the readers’ expectations. For instance “Small Avalanches” set in the 1970s features a girl who is followed by an older aggressive man. She is taunting him and trying to escape from him at the same time. Eventually when it seems that she will be caught, the man collapses and is left in the wilderness.

The element of violence is ever-occurring. In the stories with predatory men the violence is inherently gendered and replaces healthy communication between the characters. In “Norman and the Killer” there is violence from the past that prevents Norman’s healthy relationship with his girlfriend Ellen and in “The Dead” there is the death of Ilena’s student Emmet Norlan that interrupts Ilena’s love making. Norman is not able to get justice by communication with the supposed killer and eventually kills him. At the same time he is not able to understand his girlfriend and his frustration from that incapacity is reflected in the killing of the man. Ilena’s case is slightly different; she suffers no physical violence but she is abused psychologically by her first husband because of her success.

These scenes are often described by different than realistic techniques, mainly the grotesque, surrealistic and experimental. Literary techniques become in all cases “non-realistic” when there are three prerequisites fulfilled: there is violence (directly or indirectly aimed at women), dysfunctional relationships and absence of communication. The problems with communicating experience were hinted at in many chapters of the thesis. The use of other than realistic techniques represents an attempt to express what the characters themselves are not able to express and communicate; to reflect their state of mind and to make order in their chaos. These are techniques that pertain to the serious writer.

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