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The Image of Self in Selected Works of Joyce Carol Oates.

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Abstract

The variations on the theme of selfhood in the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates suggest that she is not the bleakly naturalistic writer she has been labeled. Instead, sordid naturalistic details serve as background for Oates' primary concern: the power of individual consciousness to transcend the banal and vicious in everyday life and to treasure those necessary illusions that make life bearable. Her works published from 1969-1974 constitute a tentatively affirmative artistic stance and link Oates to such pioneers of psychological realism as James and Woolf.

Central to Oates' interest in the process of self-definition is her firm belief in the congruence of the individual and history. Her works are firmly rooted in time, as she constantly reminds her readers of the historical background for her characters' actions. The works I choose for extended analysis treat two remarkably similar historical periods in American life: the Great Depression and the 1960s, dramatizing the historical crises as causes and reflections of the personal crises Oates' characters undergo.

The first chapter discusses them (1969) as an expression of Oates' two central concerns: how man often achieves success in his struggle for a stable identity through meaningful love relationships; how the individual is inextricably bound up in historical and social forces and hence must often witness, perpetrate, or fall prey to violence as a means of transcending the confines of the self. These two concerns distinguish them from Oates' previous novels written
in the naturalistic vein which prompted critics to place her work in the school of Dreiser and Norris.

*Wonderland* (1971) offers another variation on the hero's quest for identity. Jesse assumes a series of fictive selves in a futile attempt to annihilate his personality, while the circular pattern of the novel reinforces his doomed struggle. Oates emphasizes the bloody and violent events of American life which shape the consciousness of her characters; but her fundamental concern rests with consciousness itself and with her characters' agonizing attempts at self-definition.

*Do With Me What You Will* (1973) carries to fruition themes implicit in the earlier novels—chiefly the individual's reaching out for love as a means of transcending the isolation of the ego. The novel suggests the mystical view of human experience reflected in her collection of critical essays, *New Heaven, New Earth* (1974), for in the love between Jack and Elena, Oates envisions an eventual transformation of American society. Oates has moved from what she calls merely "dramatizing nightmares" to showing a way of transcending them.

Two volumes of short stories, *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972) and *The Goddess and Other Women* (1974), treat various kinds of love as they assist or inhibit one's quest for self-definition. Stories in the former anticipate the mystical concerns of *Wonderland* and *Do With Me What You Will*; *The Goddess* focuses on the various roles women assume, and reflects Oates' belief that women are trapped by the duality they are forced to live out—wanting to transcend the limits of sex and knowing they cannot.
Chapter V presents an overview of Oates' thematic and aesthetic concerns, particularly Oates' understanding of her role as artist. Her belief in the communal nature of art informs the works discussed in my study and explains her increasingly mystical view of art and life. Just as the individual in Oates' world is often both victim of the historical process and agent of its ultimate redemption through love, so too the artist, often bound by the historical givens of his period, can nevertheless humanize through his art.
Introduction

This study, which examines the exploration of the concept of self in the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates published between 1969 and 1974, calls into question the prevalent critical consensus that Oates is a twentieth-century naturalist whose novels offer a bleakly pessimistic view of human nature. Her concern with the primacy of mind or individual consciousness, I hold, lifts Oates' fiction above the narrow limitations of the naturalistic approach, linking her not to Dreiser or Steinbeck but to such pioneers of psychological realism as Henry James or Virginia Woolf. Oates' belief in the power of mind to see beyond the banal and sordid in twentieth-century life and to cherish illusions about itself constitutes an affirmative artistic stance which is evident even in a relatively early work such as them (1969).

Oates is concerned with the process of individuation in the modern world, the forging of a stable American identity in a chaotic and fluctuating society. Central to her interest in self-definition is Oates' firm belief in the congruence of the individual and history. Always firmly rooting her works in time, Oates painstakingly reminds her readers of the historical background for her characters' actions. The works I choose for extended analysis in this study treat two congruent historical periods in American life—the Great Depression and the decade of the 1960s. Oates often finds the roots of 1960s' adulthood in a Depression childhood. The characters in an Oates novel are frequently overwhelmed by historical forces, but their irrational hope and optimism in the face of personal and national defeat lends a
transcendental quality to their otherwise stark lives. Oates shows us not only the way we live in the historical present but the way we can transcend physical and biological imperatives through the power of the mind and the redemptive force of love.

For the most part my study employs a close reading of individual texts as its central method. My intention is to note structural and imagistic patterns that reinforce the theme of the quest for a stable and viable self (e.g., Oates' use of mirror imagery that serves a structural and thematic purpose). Frequently I cite reviewers' comments on Oates' fiction and the novelist's personal observations or evaluative remarks when they seem pertinent, but these are always assimilated into my larger critical analysis of her fiction. I have also attempted to integrate into my critical analysis Oates' remarks about other modern novelists with whom she obviously shares affinities (James, Kafka, O'Connor); her essays on these writers often shed light on her own artistic purpose and method.

_Them_ (1969) is the first novel to receive sustained analysis because it was the first to win Oates widespread acclaim, capturing the National Book Award in 1970. In _Them_ Oates first formulates artistically her two central and related concerns: 1) how man often achieves success in his struggle for a stable identity through meaningful love relationships; and 2) how the individual is inextricably bound up in historical and social forces and hence must often witness, perpetrate, or fall prey to violence as a means of transcending the confines of the self. These two concerns distinguish _Them_ from Oates' two previous novels, _With Shuddering Fall_ (1964) and _A Garden of Earthly Delights_
These earlier efforts were written in a more or less naturalistic vein, prompting critics prematurely to label her work as belonging to the school of Dreiser, Crane and Norris.

_Wonderland_ (1971), the second novel receiving sustained attention in the study, demonstrates an intensified concern with the hero's quest for identity. Jesse Hart becomes a famous surgeon with power over life and death, but his personal quest for identity is never really successful. Bereft of his natural family by his murderous father, Jesse proceeds through various fictive selves and assumes the role of foster son to several men who help shape his personality. His ultimate failure as a father mirrors his own orphaned existence and the cyclical structure of the novel thus reinforces the theme. Quite a few events in the novel take place against the background of the riot-torn 1960s, emphasizing the individual's necessary link with social and historical events.

Oates' 1973 novel _Do With Me What You Will_ marks a definite departure and progression from the prior works I discuss, though not as extreme a departure as some critics would have it. The novel carries to fruition themes implicit in the earlier novels—chiefly the individual's reaching out for love as a means of transcending the isolation of the ego. That Oates is moving toward a more mystical view of human experience in this novel is evidenced by the collection of critical essays appearing shortly after _Do With Me What You Will_. In this work, entitled _New Heaven, New Earth_ (1974), she discusses certain authors (notably James, Lawrence and Flannery O'Connor) in the light of their struggle to depict reality and at the same time transcend it. The
love affair between Elena Howe and Jack Morrissey is a more mature version of the Nadine-Jules relationship in them or the Reva-Jesse affair in Wonderland. In the two earlier novels these love relationships were temporary, unsustained, and abortive attempts to achieve full selfhood with another individual. But in Do With Me What You Will the love affair between Jack and Elena is writ large because Oates makes it carry the burden of not only transforming the individuals involved but society as well. The court battles and civil rights skirmishes of the 1960s provide the social framework in which Jack and Elena work out their love/hate relationship. Oates pins her hopes of transforming American life on the transformation of the individual; Jack and Elena thus become a cultural omen of things to come. Oates has moved from what she calls merely "dramatizing nightmares" to showing a way of transcending them.

The study moves on to a discussion of two volumes of short stories collected and published during the 1969-1974 period covered in my study. Marriages and Infidelities (1972) deals with the various "marriages" people contract and their frequent betrayal of these marriages. The stories represent a continuation and amplification of types of love affairs discussed in them--from the passionate ego-destroying love of a Jules-Nadine relationship to the practical, methodically-planned love affair of Maureen and her future husband. But the volume also includes those mystical attachments we form with other people--young professor with established scholar or teen-age girl with movie star--and how these unconventional alliances either inhibit the development of self or encourage its further growth. Several of the stories anticipate the
mystical concerns of Wonderland or Do With Me What You Will and thus provide an important bridge to the later works. The Goddess and Other Women (1974) represents a logical culmination of the problems of self-hood explored in the earlier novels. Arising out of Oates' thoughts about the current women's movement, the short stories focus on the various roles women assume— from goddess to prostitute— and how these real or fictive identities either help or hinder them from attaining a true self-realization and the sense of wholeness they seek. The women in this volume are often tormented by their desire to transcend the limits of sex and their inevitable realization that they cannot escape the flesh and blood to which they are bound. In this respect they are not so different from Loretta or Maureen in them, who are likewise tormented by the duality they are forced to live out.

The last chapter presents an overall view of the themes underlying Oates' fiction. I have tried in this last chapter to articulate Oates' understanding of her role as artist and to place her work in the tradition to which I believe it belongs. A tradition that includes Mann, James, Mark Twain, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Warren, her adherence to it makes her seem almost a reactionary among her own contemporaries.
Chapter I

them: The Self as Infinite Possibility

them, which articulates Joyce Carol Oates' concern with the moral and social condition of Depression children who reached maturity in the 1960s, covers a thirty-year period in our history, 1937-1967. An exploration of the problems and challenges of achieving selfhood in the modern world, it deals with three main characters in the Wendall family -- Loretta, Jules and Maureen. The novel falls neatly into three sections, each one focusing on a single character. For this reason I have chosen to follow the organization of the book in discussing it. My discussion will focus on the love relationships Loretta, Jules and Maureen pursue in an attempt to transcend the self-images which a life of poverty in America's urban slums has given them.

In them Oates uses naturalistic details and acts of violence not as an end in themselves but as a means of conveying one of the ironic and pervasive themes of her fiction: the terrifying necessity of accepting the burdens and limitations of the flesh and the corresponding need and hope of transcending them. Structural parallelisms within the novel and clever use of mirror imagery reinforce the thematic concern of the individual's self-realization. This dilemma is both personal and artistic, as it becomes both subject matter and method of presentation in an Oates novel. Just as the individual must work through the banal and vicious in his life, retaining his inviolable sense of a better self, so the artist must use the often bloody and grotesque materials of his chosen world as a way of stating a higher
truth about the struggle for selfhood: that it is the power of the mind and its often irrational capacity for optimism which lifts a Loretta, Jules, or Maureen above the sordidness of their lives and holds out for them what Calvin Bedient calls "the desperate necessity of the American dream of betterment."¹ Thus the individual and history converge and often clash in them, but the characters learn to work through the physical and emotional poverty of their lives toward a transcendent vision of themselves—a necessary illusion in an otherwise bleak world.

them begins with the words: "One warm evening in August 1937 a girl in love stood before a mirror" (p. 15).² The girl in love is sixteen-year-old Loretta Botsford, who later becomes the mother of Jules and Maureen; these three characters dominate what Oates labels the "various nightmare adventures" of the Wendalls (p. 11). The image of the young girl standing before the mirror is a microcosmic representation of what happens to the main characters as they drift into various love relationships: love either fulfills their inner, truer self (the image the mirror cannot reflect) or forces them to evade the reality of the self and live on the surface of life, projecting the public image that other people recognize. Scattered throughout the novel are numerous references by Jules, Maureen and Loretta to the real self that people do not know or cannot see—a better, wiser, more attractive person bursting to get free if only circumstances were right. For each,

¹ "Vivid and Dazzling," Nation, December 1, 1969, p. 610.
beginning a new love relationship seems to offer a chance to realize this better self, and such belief propels them through life with a clumsy, resilient grace that is often surprising.

The terrifying necessity of accepting the burdens and limitations of the flesh and the corresponding need and hope of transcending them forms an important thematic center in the novel. Loretta's first sexual encounter, with Bernie Malin, is characterized by a feeling of helplessness and abandon: "Everything was mortal. She and Bernie were alike locked in flesh" (p. 31). And later Loretta's daughter Maureen ponders the meaning of her promiscuous sex life in words that echo Loretta's experience with Bernie: "She did not understand why human beings willingly entwined their bodies together, what need had to be so greedily and violently satisfied, why there was such a rush at the last moment to come together, to get it done . . . " (p. 216). In a similar image later in the novel, Oates describes Jules and Nadine:

The trembling he felt in her body was exactly like the trembling he held back in his, as if the two of them were fated for some final convulsion, locked in each other's arms, their mouths fastened greedily together in a pose neither had really chosen--like gargoyles hacked together out of rock, freaks of mossy rock. (p. 364)

The image of being locked in flesh pervades the novel and indicates the doomed struggle of each character. Struggling through the physical and emotional poverty of their lives toward some dimly-glimpsed tomorrow, the three make feeble but often heroic attempts at self-realization through love.

The kinds of love relationships that the three main characters
endure and sustain offer clues to the self-concept each holds and help define their relationship to the world. Love is often viewed primarily as an escape from a brutalized environment—a magic avenue out of the wrenching poverty in which the characters live—thus an escape from the "slum self" each tries at one time or another to deny. The miraculous appearance of the policeman, Howard Wendall, after Loretta's brother has shot and killed her lover seems a fortuitous happening, and Loretta succumbs to his brutal lovemaking because she sees him as her ticket out of the ghetto of her youth. This first marriage of Loretta to Howard Wendall anticipates Maureen's later methodically plotted marriage to an already-married college professor—her attempt to enter the comfortable middle-class world from which she has always been excluded. Jules's initial fascination with "pale, pure women" finds its childhood love fulfillment in an attachment to Sister Mary Jerome, his grade school music teacher and a representative of a magical world of gentleness and stern purity from which his mother and sister were excluded. The hopelessness of their situations is enforced by the cyclical pattern of love relationships in the novel. Loretta, sixteen and pregnant, thinks that she is finished with her old life, that she is a different person. And her daughter Maureen at the end of the novel, pregnant and "secure," says to Jules: "I'm going to have a baby, I'm a different person"(p. 411). Jules's pathetic fascination with cold, impassive, unattainable women—Sister Mary Jerome, Faye, Nadine—repeats itself throughout the novel and serves to further reinforce the irony of love viewed as an escape. What Jules comes to realize is that even in an intensely intimate love relationship such as he has with Nadine, one is always and inevitably faced with failure in his quest for unity with
the loved one—". . . locked in a desire for fusion, unity, but turned back rudely, baffled" (p. 397). Often the very love we hope can lift us out of ourselves only results in forcing us back upon the "self" we cannot escape.

The major importance of these various attempts at self-transcendence lies in the remarkable resilience and faith of the embattled Wendalls—a faith which allows them to survive the grotesque happenings of a life of poverty in America and to emerge relatively unscathed and still functioning in the real world. Thus the belief in love as a transcendent force becomes a necessary illusion within the limited confines of the characters in the novel. Yet in the character of Jules we see an even more extreme manifestation of the power of love. Jules's passion for Nadine Green becomes a mysterious, possessive, ego-destroying experience that almost results in his death at her hands. This kind of love Oates calls "a pathological condition of the soul," a "kind of madness in which both lovers . . . create a kind of manic fiction that they may have to abandon sooner or later, but which they will never forget." Jules's ego-shattering experience with this kind of love results in a profound change in the way he views women, and indeed in his whole attitude toward the infinite possibilities such love had once opened up for him. The portrayal of such extreme states of mind and the interest generated in the mental life of her characters would seem to indicate that Oates is using the sordid, brutal details of naturalistic fiction as a necessary means to an end. Finally, it is

not with the sheer physical burdens of their existence that we as readers are concerned, but with their "other truer" selves as evidenced by their attempts at communion with others through love relationships. Narrowly circumscribed as their lives may be, the central characters approach each new love relationship hopeful for the future—even for the homeless Loretta at the end of the novel there is a vision of yet another marriage to the Post Office worker, Harold, and a new, more dignified life. Finally, the individual characters' efforts to transcend physical environment and their often pathetic desire to believe in a better life ahead mute the utter bleakness of an Oates landscape. No matter that you and I, the wiser readers, know better (or think we do). For human beings, the loss of hope is perhaps the most bitter thing of all—and such loss of hope is only a temporary setback for the characters in them. At the end of the novel, each thinks he is making a new beginning; this spiritual fortitude, often born out of dire physical necessity, is what remains in our minds.

Loretta

Loretta, probably the least intelligent and perceptive of the three main characters, with eyes "a mindless, bland blue" (p. 15) opens the novel as a young girl waiting for something to happen. Her dreary job at the Ajax Laundry and Dry Cleaners serves only to heighten her excitement on weekends and her belief that "anything can happen";

Looking into the mirror was like looking into the future; everything was there, waiting. It was not just that face she loved. She loved other things. During the week she worked at Ajax Laundry and Dry Cleaners, and she was very lucky to have that job, and during the week the
steam, rushed languor of her work built up in her a sense of excitement. What was going to happen? (p. 15)

The belief in the infinite possibilities lying in wait for the characters forms an ironic motif in the novel and acts as a connecting link among Loretta, Jules and Maureen. From the outset, Oates shows us Loretta as an alive, moderately pretty girl who sees herself as the heroine of a movie about to be whisked off from her squalid surroundings into a world more suitable for the true Loretta. Harassed and teased about her love life by her brother Brock, Loretta "pushed him out of her mind and leaned closer to the mirror, so close that her breath made a fine film on it, and the image that stared back at her with watchful, expectant eyes was the only subject of interest to her soul" (p. 27). Loretta's narcissistic blindness to the self others see is conveyed imagistically by the "fine film" on the mirror. She lives a life of the imagination and the physical realities of her daily life are only temporary obstacles to her realization of the "self" she has constructed through the help of dime-store novels and movie marquees. Yet interspersed among the vibrant descriptions of Loretta as a young girl are numerous sordid details of her drunken, out-of-work father, her criminal elusive brother, and her own childhood spent "prowling with horror amid the debris of vacant lots she could not recognize, afraid of angry mothers as well as strange kids . . ." (p. 31); hence we never lose sight of the bleakness out of which Loretta extracts so much joy in living.

Her lover's death at the hands of her brother Brock marks a turning point in Loretta's life as she feels the necessity to get a gun and pro-
tect herself from the numerous dangers always lurking for those who are innocent and unsuspecting: "And it seemed to her that her entire life had risen up to this moment like a road rising ignorantly along a slow incline; all her good intentions and hopes and her pretty face would come to flower this Sunday morning and save her, or lead her to mutilation and death. One or the other, no way out" (p. 43). Flashing through her mind as she looks at Bernie's dead body is the awareness that her youth is over—that perhaps there is no beneficent pattern directing her life: "This was not the movies. Nothing followed fast upon anything else, nothing was connected with anything else" (p. 37). But Howard Wendall, a young neighborhood policeman, appears and takes advantage of Loretta's hysterical condition by making love to her. Out of desperation, Loretta submits, closing her mind to the events of the last night: "She had loved him and he was dead and she would never see him again" (p. 50). Yet paradoxically she also realizes that this body and this face are all she has:

Loretta lived in an eternity of flesh: all week she knew the resistance of muscle, she knew its sad limits, and left to herself she explored her toenails as earnestly as her face, summing everything up, judging and hoping. Her arms, her legs, her stomach and hips, the dipping line of her spine, the rather thick set of her ankles—it was all she had, she trusted it; like a pack of flesh filled with precious organs and eager blood she leaned a little toward Bernie, waiting. (p. 33)

The "new" Loretta appears in the next chapter, pregnant and secure in the thought that she is entering a new life. She takes comfort in the fact that all the young wives in her new neighborhood lived in houses that looked alike, worried and gossipped about the same things,
and had a blind faith that they, the young, were "on their way up and never would the bottom fall out again" (p. 53). Her marriage to Howard gradually assumes its place in the sameness of her life and she realizes with a twinge of regret that "he had turned into a man, a man like her father or her friends' fathers or any father anywhere, any man, silent and angry, hungry but impatient with food . . . stuck with a terrible burden of flesh and needing someone like Loretta to ease it" (p. 58).

When Howard loses his job as policeman, Loretta realizes that her life is not fixed and secure as she had hoped, and the next chapters see her transplanted from city to country with the Wendalls and the new baby, Jules. Amid the chaotic uncertainty of her disappointing life with Howard, Loretta intuitively grasps a truth that is to pervade and inform the entire novel: "... everyone who was born must be a person—one person only—and . . . this personal, private, nameless kernel of the self could neither be broken down nor escaped from" (p. 64). The belief in the integrity and invincibility of the self is both comfort and nagging fear to the three main characters as each new adventure seems to offer a chance at a new self, but in reality only clothes the old self in new trappings. Loretta assumes various roles in the novel—lover, wife, mother, friend—but the essential Loretta remains untouched by the vicissitudes of her life. The driving force that keeps her going is her belief that a new Loretta lies just around the corner waiting for the right time and circumstance to appear. A woman may submerge herself for a time in a man's life, but she is always, eventually, throw back upon her own resources and the realization that the flesh is precarious: "... men always disappointed you, there was no hope to them, nothing. There was no center to men; their eyes, smiling
or serious, had no center to them, nothing" (p. 38). Loretta in the country weeps for her past life in the city and watches Howard grow fat and sullen and silent like all the men she has ever known. Her children Jules and Maureen keep her sane, and she wonders if Jules is really Howard's son or the son of her dead lover, Bernie, thus providing a link between the dull monotony of her present life and the infinite possibility of her short-lived youth.

The mirror motif seen earlier recurs when Loretta makes an inauspicious return to the city after Howard goes off to war. Desperate for money, Loretta contemplates prostitution as she looks at herself in the mirror: "She had changed into a flowered print dress, all golds and oranges and pinks, and her fingers tapped busily around her hair--she'd combed it out onto her shoulders, hair streaked blonde and brown. She seemed to be getting instructions from her reflection in the little mirror" (p. 83). Loretta's reflection in the mirror tells her what she later yells at her children in a crucial passage in the novel:

... I want to get dressed up and walk down the street and know something important will happen ... I wasn't meant to be like this--I mean, stuck here. I don't look like this ... I look a different way ... I know who I am--I got a lot of things to do and places to see and this isn't all there is in the world! Not this! Not for me! (p. 118)

But the succeeding events of Loretta's life prove that just the opposite is true. Always poor, faced with raising her children alone after Howard's death, she drifts from crisis to crisis, perpetuating the cycle of defeat begun with her teen-age lover's death early in the novel. And yet Loretta survives and undergoes physical transformations
echoing the inner changes she hopes are happening at the beginning of each new era in her life. After Howard's death, Loretta paints a new face for herself: "She came home with her hair tinted a light airy blonde, puffed out about her face, her eyebrows . . . arched in a new and important way . . . ; she had a new working-woman's way of smoking . . ." (p. 151). Loretta lacks the intelligence and depth of Jules and Maureen, accounting perhaps for the ease with which she slips into each new role in her life, setting into the life of a widow with the same mindless optimism that propelled her through her life with Howard. She lives on the surface of things, and her quest for self-realization is not as conscious or deliberate as Maureen's or Jules's. Her constant refrain throughout the novel is "they ain't going to get me down . . . There's not enough bastards in this city to get me down for long" (p. 157). And indeed she's right. Loretta's remarkable ability to pick up the pieces of her life after each disappointment or setback testifies to the resilience of the human spirit which acts as thematic center in the novel and keeps the characters from veering off into sheer pessimism and defeat. If Loretta learns anything from the haphazard episodes of her life, it is what Jules and Maureen also come to find out—that we are alone in this world and it is from the resources of the self that we must find the proper response to life.

The new life each character starts for himself—the new clothes, houses, cars, apartments—cannot be depended on. The physical, the fleshly, the material are evanescent and fleeting, but the human spirit remains indomitable and untouched, always believing in the necessary illusion of freedom, of an escape that is not possible.
into the person we are is both curse and salvation, for it is only through affirming the uniqueness of our individual self that we gain the illusion of freedom from it. At the end of the novel, homeless after a fire bomb destroys the apartment building in which she is living, Loretta decides that she will have "dignity" and in characteristic fashion, is sorry she "hadn't been wearing a better dress when the bomb had been thrown in the front hall" (p. 498). The hope of seeing her grandchild (Maureen's baby) helps her to keep going, and we find out from Jules that she is contemplating getting married again. It seems senseless to argue at this point about whether Loretta indeed had anything to do with what happened to her during her life. The important thing is that she believed she did, and with this belief motivating her, maybe anything can happen.

iii

Jules

Midway through the novel, Joyce Carol Oates interjects an authorial note about Jules Wendall that perhaps encapsulates his many and varied adventures and spells out for us his strange self-concept: "He thought of himself as spirit struggling with the fleshly earth, the very force of gravity, death. . . . Of the effort the spirit makes, this is the subject of Jules's story; of its effort to achieve freedom, its breaking out into beauty, in patches perhaps but beauty anyway . . . ." (p. 274). Later in the same passage, Oates speaks of Jules's "delirium of love"—a delirium that calls forth the "crazed Jules" in love with the Grosse Pointe princess, Nadine Green. Oates devotes a good portion of her narrative to the love affair between Jules and Nadine, but to understand
it fully we have to go back to his childhood and first impressions of women to see the part they played in preparing the way for the emergence of Jules's other self.

From the outset Jules is a perverse, willful, strangely independent child whose very conception is a mystery. Loretta is never sure if he is Howard's child or the child of her dead lover, Bernie. Jules's sensitivity and insight puzzle Loretta as she observes his secretive ways, his habit of stuttering— "the beginnings of words stumbling over themselves and piling up so that nothing could get loose, as if he were choking, so small a boy, suffocating with the urgency to speak" (p. 72). This fear of not being able to express himself will characterize the whole of Jules's life and perhaps accounts for the intensity of his imaginative life. His youthful desire to be alone, his pensive un-childlike mannerisms anticipate the thoughtful, serious young man he will become—a man always a little restless, the American Gatsby in search of love and the elusive glitter of happiness in a tarnished world.

Jules's fascination with maps and the wide-open spaces of the countryside where he was born does not prepare him for his first glimpse of Detroit, a city of unending streets without a center: "He wanted the still, empty space of the country even if it was punctuated by his grandmother's thumping footsteps and his grandfather's snoring and the dim, oppressive memory of his father, a man in a soldier's uniform" (p. 81). But into the chaos of his youth comes Sister Mary Jerome, a pale young music teacher whose rapid fingers on the keyboard and fluttering black sleeves entrance Jules with an exoticism totally new to him: "There was something magical in her, in her very being. She
seemed a part of the music she made" (p. 84). Jules carries her unsullied image in his mind as he listens to his friend Ramie's enticing tales of street violence and sexual exploits. Seemingly Jules's conception of himself is being threatened by the physical exigencies of a brutalized world in which he must make his own way, and he does not want to give in to the truth of what is around him. Slowly, Jules begins to realize that there are two types of women: his mother, lying on the couch, peeling the label off a beer bottle, and Sister Mary Jerome, the romantic heroine of his youthful fantasizing. The dichotomy between his conception of reality and the way things actually are is pointed out in this passage: "He did not want to put together Sister Mary Jerome and what Ramie said, the two thoughts, the two realities, but they came together of their own accord and left him baffled and trembling" (p. 89). Sister Mary Jerome's world becomes a haven of escape for Jules as he brushes past the "snot-nosed little bastards" on his way to assembly, anxious to lose himself in Sister's music and the sight of her seated primly on the stage: "Jules's eyes burned upon her. He did not think she was a beautiful woman but he had no interest in beauty; he needed something fierce and pure, lips without lipstick, a pale, grave brow, a face ready to burst into tears" (p. 94). Jules stands in awe of this kind of woman because she and those like her make it almost possible to deny the reality of women like Loretta and the dimestore clerk with whom Jules has his first sexual encounter. Thirteen and scared, Jules allows himself to be seduced by the tough, knowledgeable, older girl, who tells him when their lovemaking is over: "Now you love me."
Significantly the first sexual experience of all three main characters is marked by violence or perversion. Loretta awakes from her youthful dreams of love to find Bernie beside her in a pool of blood. Jules get "turned out" by a street-wise kid who confuses love and sex. And of course Maureen is driven to prostitute herself in her first sexual encounter by a desperate need for money. No wonder the word "love" comes to be confused with so many other things!

In fact Jules finds it difficult to keep the world of imagination and the encroaching world of reality separate. Oates' style in certain central passages conveys the confusion of realities in Jules's youthful mind; it does so by the careful juxtaposition of gentle and violent images:

Jules would look restlessly out over what he could see of the neighborhood and of Detroit, making plans—the next morning he would ask Sister Jerome if he could take piano lessons from her; the next afternoon he would steal something large and salable... the next evening he would split his father's skull in two with an axe, then take off across the country, following a map. Why not? Why not across the country, why not across the world? He yearned for the freedom of trucks and trains and planes. Why not split his father's stupid solid head? Why not seize Sister Mary Jerome's pale thin hand and bring it to his lips? (p. 97)

Jules's essentially romantic image of himself and his role in the world crystallizes early as a kind of defense mechanism—a way of beating back or at least toning down the harshness of his surroundings. He thinks of the bewilderment and fear of women in a city like Detroit, and sees himself as their savior, their Prince Charming rescuing them from drunken husbands, helping them maneuver their car through the
confused jungle of city streets. In spite of the sordid details of urban poverty in America, Jules is able to maintain an inner joy when he contemplates his "unlimited future" and thinks: "Someday I will change all this. . . . He thought of a wilderness, land out West; a golden sky, or perhaps a golden field of wheat . . . mountains . . . rivers . . . something unmapped" (p. 102). The lure of the frontier, the unknown uncharted land, thus becomes symbolic of the unknown, uncharted Jules; the openness of his dreamland corresponds to the infinite possibilities he thinks are awaiting him in the future. Thus, geographical space becomes a metaphor for interior, psychological space. Oates links the two cleverly in passages like the following:

What he would like, Jules thought suddenly, was not to be a saint exactly but to live a secular life parallel to a sacred life—a modern life, at all costs—to expand Jules out to the limits of his skin and the range of his eyesight. He could do it. He needed only time and some space to move around in. (p. 105)

Kicked out of the nuns' school, Jules thinks wistfully of the "sexless but very female" nuns—"every one of them a mother to him, ready to be adored like the Virgin Mary . . ." (p. 106). The idealism of his youth—failing to find anything in the realm of God or the saints to satisfy it—fastens on the physical realities of nuns with their fierce purity; later he transfers his adoration to Nadine—daughter of a wealthy family from Grosse Pointe.

Jules's various odd jobs—delivery boy for an expensive liquor store, parking lot attendant in a posh area of town—place him in close contact with the wealthy with their fine cars and beautiful women. He realizes the great distance between Jules Wendall and these people, but
this realization serves only to increase his awe and wonder of the wealthy and his belief that one day he, too, will join their ranks:

He felt that his true essence was of great value and would someday be expressed in ordinary signs of cars and women, and in that sense he was already one of them, though disguised from them in a windbreaker with soiled cuffs and collar and in a punk's slightly blemished face. (p. 120)

Jules's relationship with Faye marks a turning point in his life; his idealism regarding women receives a blow when Faye tells him she has an "arrangement" with a married man in Bloomfield Hills. Faye, in her cool, detached manner, introduces Jules to the world of the rich, a world that she takes calmly for granted: "She had taken him up into her life out of a languid, cynical indifference, seeing something in his face, feeling sorry for him, though she was attached permanently to another man, who lived in the suburb of Bloomfield Hills and who was permanently married" (p. 233). Jules quickly becomes infatuated with her, but is nevertheless relieved to realize that they are fated to be friends, nothing more. He is grateful when he learns that she does not threaten the inner Jules because she wants and asks nothing from him:

While she talked to him he embraced her and lay with her, in her thoughtful arms, and wept with the sweetness of her body and its remoteness. He felt as if the very bottom of his soul had been stirred. There could be no threat to him because the woman was so detached herself, wanting nothing from him. (p. 236)

Jules is surprised by the hard, steely quality Faye possesses, a trait that has enabled her to leave husband and children somewhere in Ohio to
start life anew as a kept woman. The ease with which Faye has turned her back on her family astonishes Jules as he thinks of his own inescapable attachment to his family: "Is everyone like this, trying to get free? To work themselves out of other people?" (p. 236).

When he meets Nadine for the first time, Jules keeps contrasting her with Faye: "He thought about the girl and mixed her up with the cool, disdainful lovely distance of Faye's body"; yet at the same time he sees an innocence that Faye will never have. Jules remains in awe of the essential mystery at the core of women—a mystery that becomes synonymous with the "golden interiors" of the Grosse Pointe mansions:

He had dreams in which Faye's body was confused with the bulk of a house, one of those beautiful ornate houses, and this in turn was confused with the body, and being, of Bernard's niece [Nadine], who, innocent as Faye was not, had the right to live in such a home. Faye would never live in such a home. And he dreamed, sleeping lightly, of the mysterious golden interior of one of these homes, its rooms and corridors and its softness, like the fragrant softness of a woman's secret body, a mystery to him. (p. 265)

Nadine has some of the golden glow of Gatsby's Daisy, for she is representative of a world Jules knows only from afar. It is part of Jules's naivete and essentially romantic view of the world to equate the mystery and impenetrability of Grosse Pointe mansions with the impenetrability of the women who inhabit them: ". . . if he had fallen in love with Bernard's niece, he had fallen in love with all the nieces and daughters of the Pointes, those fair-skinned, thoughtful girls with their shining clean hair" (p. 266).

Unlike Jay Gatsby, Jules realizes that no amount of money will win Nadine; hence he is thrown back on his own resources and faith in his
ability to win the prize, in his luck. Oates repeats a familiar refrain in the passages dealing with Jules's reveries about Nadine—"anything can happen"—and suggests that Jules's belief in his own freedom and ability to control his life accounts for his chameleon-like quality of changing roles or personalities to suit the moment. Contemplating his chances with Nadine, Jules objectifies his actions and consciously "rehearses" (p. 266) the part of Jules Wendall, her lover, judging and evaluating himself. Oates's characters share a remarkable ability to lift themselves above the gross mundane elements of their lives and through sheer mental power to project themselves into a role better than the one life has cast for them; thus in a sense Jules, like Gatsby, is a "platonic conception of himself." Yet Jules never completely discounts the darker possibilities of his life:

Everything lay before him. But sometimes, beneath the frothy odor of the flowers in his truck, he caught a whiff of something harder, more permanent, the stench of failure that was blown back into his face from the exhaust of a city bus or a big auto carrier, the sour, foul stench of failure, of the foul, dark joke of a world in which he had lived all his life and might never escape. (p. 267)

When Jules first enters Nadine's room, he is transfixed with wonder as he realizes that this is the first time he has ever seen a room "anyone had seriously lived in" (p. 282). The room becomes, in Jules's mind, a shrine for the purity Nadine represents: "His heart thudded suddenly, seeing it, understanding that it belonged to Nadine and had been built around her, built for her and her alone. Her price was beyond estimation" (p. 282). From the outset of their relationship, Jules has a fear of encroaching madness, of losing himself completely in the
virginal Nadine—of losing consciousness and letting the other, crazed Jules, take over. Nadine, on the other hand, is like Faye or Sister Mary Jerome, a cold, implacable woman who maintains her distance because of a fear of closeness with another person: "People don't touch me," she said. "I don't let them near me. I don't want to get them mixed up with myself, everybody so close" (p. 284).

Their trip out west through Arkansas and Texas becomes a kind of spiritual odyssey for Jules during which he never once makes love to Nadine. She keeps him at a distance, continually frustrating his desire for fulfillment and completion in a woman. Curiously, Jules feels himself becoming a disembodied spirit—the self he had always imagined:

He was growing keener, more intelligent, as his flesh was wearing away from him—he had lost weight, but there seemed to him a kind of spiritual leanness also, an intensity. . . . She was eerily sweet, lying in his arms, fully dressed . . . but still she kept pure her own image of herself. . . . Her sad, evil vision of purity kept him pure. He could not contaminate her with his lust; she seemed to feel nothing. (p. 294)

Like the impregnable walls and gates of her father's mansion, Nadine's purity provides protection for her—a barrier against the threatening rush of Jules's feelings that could violate and expose the self she has kept hidden and repressed for so long. Jules's sexual frustration serves only to increase his sense of wonder at the "gift" of Nadine herself, traveling with him so openly through the American countryside. Despite his disappointment in the bleak, ugly land he travels through, Jules never loses sight of the future and the "ideal landscape" of his dreams. Increasingly, however, Jules has a gnawing doubt that there
can be no clearing in the wilderness "without someone's labor, someone's betrayal" (p. 296). Like Gatsby, he is forced to accept the fact that the materials for achieving one's dream are often shabby and unromantic, as is the succession of cheap motels with blinking neon lights where he and Nadine sleep. The idyllic landscape in his mind dissolves into the wasteland reality around him:

Jules scanned the flat horizon and could locate nothing anywhere of promise. . . . There were scatterings of pine trees but they looked anemic and second-rate. The blighted elms of Detroit were not less beautiful. He passed a bowling alley that looked closed. On its gravel driveway boys were playing, riding bicycles. Their shouts excited Jules. Hadn't he also been a child, in the country? But this was not the country. It was not the city either. Raw, gaping hunks had been cut out of the earth—in preparation for a shopping plaza maybe—trees were overturned, dried out. Vacant fields. (p. 297)

Through this Valley of Ashes Jules drives his storybook princess, his mind seeming to deny the reality of what he sees around him; he is full of dreams of becoming something—a politician, a governor, a senator—and of eventually possessing Nadine. While Nadine, like Faye, has turned her back on her family with a casualness that astonishes Jules, he cannot shake off the memory of his family back in Detroit or his feeling that he is irreparably bound to "them." It is this "frigid casualness" Nadine has that enables her to abandon Jules in a seedy motel room, writhing in agony from sickness. When he regains consciousness, Jules realizes that he is alone, "and that seemed to him the end of the story of Jules and Nadine" (p. 312).

But they are fated to meet years later, to consummate the halting,
immature love relationship begun when they were younger. In the meantime, Jules has traveled from town to town, drifting from one job to the next, writing strange letters home in which he talks about his bright future and his feeling that the "Spirit of the Lord" is in him. Returning to Detroit, Jules feels himself reborn:

... twenty-seven years old and on the verge of a new life, feeling himself immortal with a decent job for the first time in his career, wearing decent clothes, having put behind him the red dirt of the South and the Southwest, reborn in the North . . . . (p. 345)

Into the relative calm of this period in his life comes Nadine, now another man's wife, "older, more elegant, with a peculiar translucent, uncanny beauty, as if she had now imagined herself a different woman . . . ." (p. 355).

Jules now feels himself drawn to Nadine with a "terrible desire to sink himself in her, to fulfill himself in her, to get to some avenue straight and clean . . . an avenue of clarity in his mind" (p. 357). What was the truth about himself? What was the meaning of his life? Oates makes it clear that their relationship is doomed by her subtle use of words and images conveying Jules's fear and dread of beginning again with her. As he sits in her Bloomfield Hills mansion (amazingly like her father's in Grosse Pointe), Jules has a curious sense of dissolution—a premonition of the future in which he will indeed lose his soul to Nadine. Later Nadine does try to murder him. They spend their feverish days in a motel room—rented by Nadine—endlessly making love and re-hashing the events of their respective pasts. Jules recaptures some of the golden glow he felt earlier, and the radiance of Nadine's
body becomes confused in his mind with the gleaming furniture of the
elegant room. Yet amid the frenzy of their lovemaking Jules feels an
undercurrent of disaster:

[he] wondered if, inside her, still, was that de-
liberate perverse purity, that obscene purity, she
had prized years ago. Did she go about the objects
of her life thinking, Nadine Green is walking here
undefiled, to the left of this, to the right of that,
precise and virginal? He understood that his rival
was not her husband, who was a kind of ally, being a
man, but this woman's image of herself as a woman,
her melancholy frigidity. (p. 376)

Jules's instincts are right. While he totally immerses himself in her,
becoming "formless" (p. 378), "beatific" (p. 379), "absolved of the
heaviness he'd been carrying around . . ." (p. 379), Nadine fails to
respond fully to him, to achieve the sexual fulfillment he does.

Jules feels that his life has reached a plateau, that he has final-
ly expanded Jules to his outer limits as he had once hoped to do. Think-
ing of a painting he had seen once in the Detroit art museum, Jules
feels as if he and Nadine are like the people portrayed on canvas:

It [the painting] had seemed, then, to hold a
secret for him—the way out of Detroit. Now,
standing with Nadine in this empty apartment,
he found himself back in those days. He felt
that his life now surpassed anything he could
have imagined, even with his energy. He had
gone beyond himself. (p. 384)

But the joy of sexual fulfillment is tainted with fear for Jules
as he realizes he will never penetrate the mystery at the core of Na-
dine; they are "doomed to be locked together in a passion that could
come to no end." In a passage with mystical overtones, Oates describes
in religious imagery Jules's feelings during his days of intimacy with
Nadine: he compares himself to a Biblical prophet, "lacerated with having lived through so much" (p. 389); "His eyes burned with the experience of miracles like the eyes of a Biblical prophet, a bearded, wild-eyed prophet of some nameless desert. . . . He was slowly losing his strength, his soul." Jules's failure to satisfy Nadine, coupled with her own fear of giving herself up to the abandon of sexual climax, opens a void between them, and their days of intimacy quickly turn sour. Oates describes Nadine as a victim, the "soiled conspirator in [Jules's] lust" (p. 399). Dazed with unfulfilled lust and full of disgust with herself for giving in to Jules so easily, Nadine tries to kill him—a violent end to a love affair marked by violence.

The chapter ends with the statement, "The Spirit of the Lord departed from Jules," a sentence that takes on real meaning when we see in the final pages of the novel that Jules did not die bodily—only spiritually. Jules, the free-soaring spirit, has become Jules, "a weight," "an object" who had "outlived himself in a body" (p. 418). Disillusioned and bitter, Jules prowls the streets of Detroit, taking in movies, seeing in the riot-burned buildings a reflection of his own emptiness, his invisibility. Jules's relationship to women is now characterized by indifference—a desire to use them as "objects" later to be discarded. The sense of wonder is missing—the spiritual idealistic Jules seems dead indeed. Taking money from Vera—the teenage junkie and prostitute—is something the other Jules would not or could not have done. Deadened, insensitive, blinded to the individuality of the women with whom he sleeps, Jules senses the impasse to which he has come: "Now, thirty years old, this Jules lay asleep or dying,
drained of himself" (p. 442). Jules has reached the center of indifference; yet his recovery is imminent. Shaken out of his passivity by the violence and tumult of the Detroit riots—buildings looted, fires burning—Jules has an apocalyptic vision of what has happened to him and of his future:

Jules felt suddenly intoxicated. Someone touched him and the intoxication was complete: he understood the old Jules had not truly died but had only been slumbering, in an enchanted sleep; the spirit of the Lord had not truly departed from him. (pp. 489-90)

Caught up in the chaos of the Detroit riots, awakened from his sleep-walking pose by the violence and dazzle of the flames burning the city to the ground, Jules becomes a part of the violence and in a climactic scene finally kills a policeman pursuing him.  

The figure of the policeman inevitably invites comparison with Jules's "father" Howard Wendall—the policeman who rapes then marries Loretta after finding her in bed with her murdered lover; hence Jules's murder of the policeman emerges as a symbolic killing of the father. Jules's murder seems the appropriate and inevitable outburst of the long

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4 See Walter Sullivan, "The Artificial Demon: Joyce Carol Oates and the Dimensions of the Real," Hollins Critic, 9, No. 4 (1972), 10. Sullivan passes over this climactic scene, failing to realize its structural and psychological significance. Sullivan criticizes Oates for "writ[ing] the same story over and over—a chronicle where violence is a prelude to total spiritual disintegration and the only freedom is the total loss of self." I disagree, for it seems to me that violence is often just the opposite—a prelude to spiritual reintegration. Particularly in this scene, the structural parallels to other scenes in the book must be taken into account. Jules does not lose himself totally, but regains some of his former wonder and optimism and heads West again at the end of the book.
pent-up rage and frustration which had begun accumulating in his child­hood, when as a young boy Jules is pursued by an enraged policeman through back alleys before being cornered, crouched in a fetal position; in this earlier scene the policeman points his gun to Jules's temple and pulls the trigger—but the gun is empty, and the policeman must satisfy his rage by beating the boy senseless. The later policeman's pursuit of Jules through riot-torn streets takes on surrealistic over­tones, much like the earlier chase scene to which Oates devotes so much attention. Both times Jules feels trapped, helpless, and the labyrinthine landscape of alleys, back streets, and gutted buildings becomes an appropriate metaphor for the tortured windings of Jules's mind forever posing the questions, "Who am I and what am I doing here?" The first time Jules does not escape, but in this scene Jules assumes mastery of the situation and does what he must—kill. The "solid, violent certainty" he feels emerging is the necessity to form a new identity, and the relentless pace of Oates' descriptions of the riot and murder exactly matches the pounding urge motivating Jules's actions:

The wild ride had given him strength. He ran nearly doubled over, his hands raised, the gun raised in front of him. He was in an alley... down a street somewhere, an unknown street... lights from fires glowed on the walls... Running, he could not stop running! Was this Jules after all, running like this, sprung out of a smashed car and on his own, like a soldier with his rifle? (p. 496)

In the earlier scene, cornered and frightened by the policeman in the broken-down shanty, Jules crouches like a child in a fetal position, "embracing his own body" (p. 123), while in this episode he runs "nearly doubled over" (p. 496). Surely the suggestion here is unmistakable.
Too frightened before to "meet that cop face to face" (p. 124), Jules is frightened no longer. He breaks free from the clinging policeman, aims the rifle in his face, and kills him. The skillful blend of stark, naturalistic detail and surrealistic landscape suggests that the action here is not merely a physical one, but a symbolic prelude to Jules's spiritual re-emergence.

Being reborn in the 1960s poses its unique identity problems for Jules, and we next see him on a television program being interviewed along with the other radical activists, explaining his own revolutionary credo. It is a chastened Jules who can say:

Violence can't be singled out from an ordinary day! Everyone must live through it again and again, there's no end to it, no land to get to, no clearing in the midst of the cities—who wants parks in the midst of the cities?—parks won't burn! (p. 503)

Jules becomes a minor celebrity in radical circles, and the next time we see him he is headed out West again—to California—with a new car and plans to earn sufficient money to return and marry Nadine. His actions then would seem to belie his incendiary rhetoric, for it seems clear that he has not abandoned his quest for a clearing in the wilderness or for the golden girl.

The essential Jules remains unchanged despite the many and varied disguises he has assumed in his life. His chameleon-like adaptability, coupled with his staunchly American belief in his own talent and worth, will get him through the rest of his life. Like his mother, Loretta,

5 Oates says that Jules is "on his way to some sort of American success. He is a hero and murderer at once." See Linda Kuehl, "An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," Commonweal, December 5, 1969, p. 308.
Jules is blessed with a remarkable flexibility and strength, and it is
his belief in the future—his own and the country's—that motivates his
continuing search for the self.

Maureen

Maureen Wendall, daughter of Loretta and sister of Jules, is a
quiet, introverted, sensitive person who, like her mother and brother,
is never really allowed to be a child. Teased and taunted by her fam-
ily for keeping "secrets" and wearing a "long face" (p. 130), Maureen
learns early in her life that nothing is fixed, nothing certain. Mov-
ing from one house to another, never having a room to call her own, she
is confused and frightened by the impermanence and precariousness of her
life: "She held herself back, she carried herself cautiously, afraid
but not knowing exactly why she was afraid. Moving from one house to
another disturbed her. She couldn't sleep for many nights in the new
house" (p. 127).

Maureen is forced, like her brother Jules, to live an intense ima-
ginative life in which she acts out roles of leader and teacher, which
she is not permitted to assume in real life. Her daydreams are capable
of lifting her above the coarse, mundane details of her everyday life
and of providing an outlet for her sensitive, artistic temperament:

Scraping garbage into the smelly pail under the
sink, doing the dishes until her face was flushed
from the heat, Maureen forced her mind to concen-
trate upon the schoolroom she presided over or upon
the ravine in which the wild horses lived or upon
the library with its waxed, smooth floors and the
occasional clicking of the librarian's typewriter.
(p. 139)

Amid the dirt and chaos of her life spent in a succession of slum
apartments indistinguishable from each other, Maureen yearns for the
day when things will be arranged neatly, "when she could arrange her
life the way she arranged the kitchen after supper, and she too might
then be frozen hard, fixed, permanent, beyond their ability to hurt"
(p. 136). She is forced into a love-hate relationship with members of
her family, and alternates between loving them intensely and wishing
them dead. The overcrowded conditions of their decrepit apartment
make Maureen conscious of being slowly crowded out of any privacy or
personal life by the ever-encroaching presences of Jules, Loretta, Bet­
ty and Howard, her father. The transient nature of their lives per­
haps affects Maureen most of all the family, and she finds an escape
from "them" in the "polished" kingdom of the library--a place recalling
the waxen kingdom of Jules's and Nadine's hotel room.

Maureen cherishes the silence of the library (so different from her
home) where people walked quietly and talked in whispers. The lovely
orderliness and calm of stories in books comforts her and offers her
consolation that some things in life are indeed permanent:

As soon as she read the first page of a novel
by Jane Austen she was pleased, startled, ex­
cited to know that this was real: the world
of this novel was real. Her own life . . .
could not be real. The birdlike chatter of
her mother, Betty's grunts and bad temper,
the glimpse Maureen had to content herself with
of Jules out on the street were not so real
as novels, not so convincing. (p. 179)

Maureen is able to lose herself in these novels, to "dissolve into
nothing" (p. 179), for she believes at this stage of her youth that art
is superior to life: "How could she or her people be raised to this
level of suffering?" (p. 179). The books begin to assume an important
role in Maureen's life in several ways. Libraries, those quiet vaults of knowledge, hold a sacred fascination for Maureen for they are so very different from the noise and chaos in which she lives; thus they offer her a hope of escape. The characters and situations in books are relatively calm and patterned and so much more ennobling than the cru­dities of her life. Her ability and desire to read and enjoy books marks Maureen as different from the rest of her family--set apart from them as though she belonged to a secret society. Thus when she becomes Sister Mary Paul's homeroom secretary, entrusted with the care of the Secretary's Minutes' Book, Maureen is honored and pleased, and a little afraid of such a responsibility. Being a secretary, having a definite role to play in the events at school, made her feel safe: "The rest of the week was confusing, and on her way home anything might happen and at home anything might happen, but being a secretary, having a special job, was safe" (p. 163). Significantly, Maureen never brings the secretary's book home for fear it will get soiled and wrinkled.

Growing up listening to Loretta talk to girlfriends about rapes, abortions, babies being deformed, Maureen gets no guidance from her mother except an occasional remark about not letting the boys push her around or make smart cracks. Jules is never home, and the occasional glimpses of him Maureen gets on the street convince her he has entered an adult world--free at last of his family. Then one day Maureen loses the notebook--a seemingly insignificant event that nevertheless marks a turning point in her life. The act of losing the notebook assumes symbolic importance in the novel because of Maureen's love for books and the library, and her view of them as an escape--a link with a quieter, saner, more civilized world. Losing the notebook becomes syn-
role in Maureen's life in several ways. Libraries, those quiet vaults of knowledge, hold a sacred fascination for Maureen for they are so very different from the noise and chaos in which she lives; thus they offer her a hope of escape. The characters and situations in books are relatively calm and patterned and so much more ennobling than the cru­dities of her life. Her ability and desire to read and enjoy books marks Maureen as different from the rest of her family—set apart from them as though she belonged to a secret society. Thus when she becomes Sister Mary Paul's homeroom secretary, entrusted with the care of the Secretary's Minutes' Book, Maureen is honored and pleased, and a little afraid of such a responsibility. Being a secretary, having a definite role to play in the events at school, made her feel safe: "The rest of the week was confusing, and on her way home anything might happen and at home anything might happen, but being a secretary, having a special job, was safe" (p. 163). Significantly, Maureen never brings the secretary's book home for fear it will get soiled and wrinkled.

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onymous in Maureen's mind with losing her future—her chance one day to be a secretary, earn money, and leave home:

It seemed to Maureen that her life was coming undone. The world was opening up to trap her, she was losing her mind. . . . She crossed a vacant lot she had crossed earlier. Papers and junk everywhere but no blue notebook. . . . She looked in an alley. . . . Sister's face knew everything. Maureen's life was in her keeping. Maureen was guilty and never, never would she be forgiven, there was no way out, no escape . . . . (p. 170)

The tragedy of this event in Maureen's life stems from its effect on her self-concept. Never quite sure of what her role in the family is, never certain of other people's opinions of her, Maureen seizes upon this trivial event as somehow indicative of her real self—careless, sloppy, cheap, selfish. Fending off her mother's accusations that she "meets boys" at the library, Maureen wonders which Maureen her mother is talking to:

She wondered if maybe her mother was talking to the real Maureen, a girl who was hypocritical and selfish and sly. Was that the real Maureen? Sometimes when she was alone, walking along the street, she was taken by surprise seeing her reflection in a store window, a remote, ghostly reflection she never quite expected or realized . . . (p. 182)

It is as though the instability of her family life, its transient, erratic nature, has rubbed off inescapably on Maureen herself. She is never sure from one moment to the next where they will be living, what job Loretta will have, or whether she will ever see Jules again, and this uncertainty characterizes the shifting image she has of herself. It is a "tentative reflection" Maureen sees in the glass (p. 172)—one that
mirrors the very restless and transitory conditions in which she lives. Gradually, her desire for permanence, clarity, and freedom focuses on getting money—that forbidden, elusive substance talked about in hushed whispers between her parents and dispensed so freely to her by her brother Jules. Money thus becomes a way of preserving her identity and individuality. She had begun putting aside a little extra money in her childhood as a way of separating herself from others in her family:

"Saving money was a secret no one else was to know about and a secret that made her different from all of them" (p. 133); but after she begins losing confidence in her ability to mold her life into some pattern, money becomes an obsession with her.

Loretta's marriage after Howard's death to Pat Furlong only intensifies Maureen's resolve to get away from the jumble of events at home and do something with her life. She slowly withdraws more and more from events in her family and tries not to look at Loretta, pregnant again, moaning that she is "too old to go through this again" (p. 183). Maureen pretends not to understand the "secrets of female life open to her" (p. 183), but in her adolescent musings she daydreams about being pregnant herself—being a woman inescapably like her mother. She rejects the idea of falling into the same trap as Loretta; money becomes the way out of such a trap. Along with her desire for money, and perhaps the cause of it, is Maureen's sinking feeling that "the old daydreams were all finished. . . . Everything was emptied out, exhausted. She might have been inhabiting her mother's body. The only richness was in books, but the books lay on the sofa, read and reread, emptied. They could no longer stir her" (p. 195).

The density of words on a page, once so enticing and magical, fails
Maureen becomes coarsened, hard:

A change came over her one morning as she sat staring out the window of the apartment at nothing. The baby was crying. Loretta was bathing him. Maureen felt a certain hardness come over her, as if something invisible were blessing her, as if a shell were shaping itself out of her skin . . . . Her muscles cringed and then relaxed in acceptance. She felt herself change. (pp. 197-8)

The next day Maureen allows herself to be picked up by a man on the street. This is the way to get money. As she rides in the car with this stranger, Maureen imagines she hears music, and she feels as if she were being gently borne along a stream. The language here is strikingly similar to that used in a description of Jules and Nadine: "he felt the two of them drifting relentlessly downstream . . . " (p. 362). Oates is perhaps consciously linking the two (Maureen and Jules) through the suggestion that their separate love entanglements were fated, inescapable, and doomed. In all of these casual encounters with men, Maureen feels a sense of freedom—a relief that she has finally found the escape from her unbearable home life. Yet at the same time, she is left cold in her sexual encounters; she is totally passive, uninvolved, and feels nothing. Rarely does she actually look into the faces of her lovers, and the distance she maintains becomes a method of self-defense, as it did for Faye and Nadine:

Still she felt nothing. It was not personal. If her heart was beating fast, it was in imitation of what she ought to be feeling but did not quite feel, as if her body were at a safe distance from herself. (p. 201)
Maureen has no interest in the men she sleeps with aside from the fact that they will supply her with money; indeed, the mechanical motions of their love scenes become a bleak commentary on the desensitized dehumanization of love in the modern world.

Maureen thinks of each encounter as a series of cycles, each one predictable and sure:

She had memorized all the parts of the cycle, the route the machinery took to its inevitable end; she wanted to hurry it along. . . . A man was like a machine: . . . There were certain cycles to go through . . . and in a minute or two it would end with his sudden paralyzed tension, his broken breath against her face, the familiar urgent signs of a man’s love.

(pp. 208-9)

For Maureen, nothing is real but the money in her purse, but at times she even doubts this. She wonders what is real, what will last, what can be counted on. And still at the core of Maureen’s being is a desire to get hold of something that will not change, or fade, or drift away. She realizes that the person she is is unstable, constantly changing—the Maureen who lies in bed, a passive victim (like Nadine) waiting for the action to run its course, is not the same Maureen who gets up and dressed, eager to go back home and count her money. The disjointed, confused nature of Maureen’s thoughts is conveyed by Oates’ style as she tells us Maureen’s thoughts when she realizes she has been seen by Furlong, her stepfather. Paragraphs are short, impressionistically rendered vignettes shifting from past to present—as Maureen’s mind shifts from scrubbing the filthy kitchen floor to the mud and giant orange girders of the expressway being constructed; from a friend of Loretta’s talking in the kitchen about her mother-in-law, to the
hillobillies standing on the streetcorner waiting to cross the street. Such erratic shifts in time build tension, increase our awareness of Maureen's imminent danger, and prepare us for the climactic scene of this section in which Maureen's stepfather, Furlong, beats her in a drunken rage.

The next section of the novel begins with a surrealistic scene dramatizing the dichotomy between the two Maureens; the scene is at a bus stop where Loretta and Maureen are waiting for the bus. Maureen, daydreaming, impulsively steps into the traffic and Loretta grabs her arm tightly. The weak, dependent Maureen who lets Loretta guide her away from the danger contrasts sharply with the "real" Maureen we see next in a dreamlike sequence:

She is already on the bus, with her mother still gripping her when she turns and sees her self step out of her body, with a sudden convulsive movement, freeing itself, escaping. The self is her. It steps down to the sidewalk again, pushing past other people who want to get on the bus. It glances back up at her. Everything rushes out of Maureen now and joins that other body, that free body, running away... [People] become invisible while she herself, that other self, becomes vivid and dazzling, standing on the sidewalk with her head turned back at a painful angle, looking at Maureen on the bus, her face guilty and wild. (p. 222)

This scene occurs again in Maureen's memory later in the book, as she begins to awaken from the lethargic trance she has been in since her beating. Like Jules, Maureen seems to be the victim of unconscious forces and drives that frighten her and literally take her out of the safe body or "disguise" she inhabits. The guilty, wild Maureen who escapes is the same girl who earlier flirts coyly with strangers on the street and goes with them to seedy motel rooms, staking her claim to freedom.
by the secret hoard of money she collects. The Maureen we see after the beating is totally withdrawn, almost buried alive in her body, fat, listless, and semi-catatonic. The Maureen who had once felt so free has been betrayed by the money her stepfather finds in the book, and her senseless beating has forced her to retreat from the real world and hide behind the disguise of illness. When Jules first sees her after the incident, he is shocked:

Her hair had grown long and straggly, worse than the hair he saw on broken-down women in the city, and her face had a puffed, plump, shiny look to it. . . . Her face, once very pretty, was now gross and blemished; blotches had come out on her forehead and cheeks. On her left cheek was a rash of pimples that was nearly solid. (pp. 228-9)

Maureen stays in this trance-like state for months during which her mind recalls disjointed, unconnected scenes from her past—men she has slept with, snatches of Jules's letters her Uncle Brock reads her, fights between her sister and Loretta. The mirror image occurs again just before Maureen wakes from her revery. This time she imagines the mirror will show her no reflection so she doesn't look. She feels faceless: "her body had the hopeless feeling of having become weight, a bulk" (p. 312). The soddenss of Maureen's body is linked in her mind with the promiscuous sexual encounters she has had—encounters that because they did not engage her whole self, resulted in her feeling used—the skin of her face rubbed raw by the rough faces of her lovers. The grotesqueness of her new body becomes a convenient disguise to hide behind, but one spring day she finds herself awaking:

Maureen dreams, a little restless with spring.
The open window shows sky to her. Her slightly
bluish arms lie without movement on the covers of her bed. A foul-smelling bed. A winter of a bed. . . . She yawns, she sleeps. A door opens in her brain. She says to herself questioningly, Where is Maureen now? Beyond the television's droning she hears new sounds, outer sounds, people talking on the stairs. . . . Against her will she listens. (pp. 326-7)

The next part of the book is taken up with the letters the actual Maureen Wendall writes to her former teacher, Joyce Carol Oates. In the letters, she fills us in on the details of her life after waking from her trance. Oates, in a foreword to the book, claims these letters were actually written to her by the Maureen Wendall of the novel; if this is true, we have in these letters the record of a survivor—what Oates talks about in a 1970 interview: "I feel that literature is wonderfully optimistic, instructive, because it so often demonstrates how human beings get through things, maneuver themselves through chaos, and then write about it." Maureen writes confessional letters to her former teacher, verbalizing much of the agony she has gone through, objectifying her experience and questioning the relationship of art to life:

Why did you think that book about Madame Bovary was so important? All those books? Why did you tell us they were more important than life? They are not more important than my life. (p. 333)

But the core of Maureen's letters is concerned with love—what it means to love someone, what it is like to give yourself with love. Maureen's life on the streets has not prepared her for the comfortable, middle-class emotions of a Joyce Carol Oates, yet she desperately wants the normal life so far denied her:

I am going to fall in love. Tomorrow night I'll see the man I have picked out to love. He is already married; he has three children. I want him. I want him to marry me. I am going to make this happen and begin my life. (p. 336)

As she writes this letter, Maureen believes that she can indeed begin a new life, can "escape the doom of being Maureen Wendall all of my life" (p. 338). She has decided to let herself become one with the guilty, wild Maureen free on the streets, except this time her prize is not to be money but a husband, children, a house of her own. She dreams of a world where "you can go in and out of bodies, changing your soul, everything changing and not fixed forever . . ." (p. 338). Like Loretta and Jules, she constructs an imaginary self—a mental image of Maureen as she wants and feels she ought to be, and she goes about arranging her life to fulfill this image. She attacks the idea—proposed by teachers—that art gives form to life, yet feels the need for something to shape her experience and give it meaning:

We [women] are the ones who leaf through magazines with colored pictures and spend long heavy hours sunk in our bodies, thinking, remembering, dreaming, waiting for something to come to us and give a shape to so much pain. (p. 341)

The shaping force in Maureen's life would seem to be her own image of herself as wife and mother living a comfortable suburban existence.

The last section of the novel deals primarily with Maureen's methodically plotted love affair with her college teacher, the "married man" in her letters to Oates. In a striking introductory scene in this section, Maureen, like the young Loretta earlier in the novel, stands before a mirror, studying her reflection. It is a "clouded" reflection
in a "cheap bureau mirror," but, again like Loretta, Maureen realizes this is all she has. This particular face and body, a mystery to her, are "doomed to be Maureen all her life." But she believes in the power of love to help her escape: "But she will . . . sink into love, fall backward into an abyss of love that will obliterate most of what was Maureen" (p. 407). The prize Maureen seeks is a total loss of self—becoming another person through love. Unsure of how to give herself to this man when the time comes, confused about what it means to say "I'm in love," Maureen sees past the man himself, Jim Randolph. She thinks only of being married to him, wanting marriage:

She wants to love him, with her heart and with her body, but there is no time for love to rise in her; she does not know how to work it up, cultivate it, she's heard too much about it from her mother and other girls and from the movies . . . (p. 410)

Yet she stares into the mirror as if looking into her future, confident that her face will bring her the life she wants.

The married man Maureen has chosen to love is her teacher at the junior college, and in the passages dealing with him, Oates delineates his own struggle with a divided self. Living in a crowded apartment, working at two jobs, Jim Randolph at age thirty-four hides behind a "kindly" face—a familiar self that others knew and appreciated. Yet at the back of his mind is a nagging fear that something is going to happen to shake up his complacent life:

He had married to settle himself into a certain life, to place himself in a certain relationship to his own family and to her family. . . . He had wanted an end to the confusion of emotions that
Jim Randolph's situation, then, serves as ironic counterpart to Maureen's, for she too wants marriage as a way of fixing her life, of establishing a certain relationship with other young married women—and who is to say that at thirty-four she will not look back and be frightened to think that nothing has been settled in her life. When Maureen comes into his life, Jim Randolph is waiting for something to happen, yet "at the back of his mind was a premonition of blankness, an ultimate disappointment—that he was no more than the ordinary man he had always tried to be, and that his fate was to be ordinary" (p. 426).

Jim and Maureen are drawn together by a mutual desire to change their lives, yet at the end of the novel when Maureen tells Jules, "I'm going to have a baby, I'm a different person" (p. 507), we are left to wonder if indeed anything has changed. She confesses to Jules that they have no money, that Jim has to pay child support; it seems as if the familiar cycle is beginning all over again. But Maureen believes she has obliterated her old self, has broken free, leading the kind of life she has always wanted. Like Loretta and Jules, she has blind faith in the future—a faith that has brought her through a chaotic jumble of events to a "fixed" place—"pretty, clean, married" (p. 508).

Conclusion

Perhaps a central truth emerging from them—a truth that the Maureen of the novel denies—is that art can indeed give form to life. Joyce Carol Oates' novel, constructed from the actual events of the
Wendalls' story, has succeeded in giving shape and meaning to the agony they suffered. If the real Maureen should read them, would she be surprised to see the events of her life forming a pattern, though ostensibly a cyclical pattern of defeat and pessimism?

Out of the chaos of their personal history, the Wendalls nevertheless extracted some joy in living—patches of brightness that helped to lift the gloom of their everyday lives. But it is not solely with the Wendalls as individuals that Oates and we are concerned, but with Loretta, Jules and Maureen as Americans who lived through a trying period in our country's history, surviving the Depression to witness the riots of the 1960s. Thus in reading them we become like Jack Burden or Quentin Compson, seekers of our history, the roots of our own present in the mistakes and failures of the past. The novel becomes a paradigm of our condition as twentieth-century Americans; forever linked with our personal and historical "selves," we nevertheless, like Loretta, Jules and Maureen, must look to the future and trust in our own ability to shape it.
Chapter II

Wonderland: The Self in Hiding

Joyce Carol Oates' *Wonderland* (1971) is dedicated to "all of us who pursue the phantasmagoria of personality." It shares with them both a concern with the problems of defining and maintaining a stable self in the modern world and a belief in the congruence of the individual and history. Covering roughly the same thirty-year interval as its predecessor (1937-1967), *Wonderland* met with more mixed critical reaction than the earlier novel. Peter Prescott in *Newsweek* cites the lack of thematic development in the novel, asserting that "perhaps the truth of Joyce Carol Oates' novels is no more than the truth of journalism," while J. A. Avant calls it the "greatest of Oates' novels." Roger Sale writes that the novel is not "convincing" because the ending is "pathetically inadequate." He further contends that Oates is essentially a short story writer who cannot see her novels through to the end. Brian P. Hayes thinks that *Wonderland* surpasses them because it expresses "Tolstoy's sense of history as it overwhelms the individual."

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Perhaps one reason for the varying estimates of the novel is the fact that it is less realistic, more abstract in concept, than their—dealing with ambiguous questions of the nature of human personality. While the novel contains such familiar Oatesian devices as use of parallel scenes to reinforce cyclical pattern and mirror scenes as revelation of "the monster within," *Wonderland* is finally a novel of escape from self rather than search for self.

In *them*, Loretta, Jules and Maureen were all searching for that elusive self that could gain them love, fame and happiness, but Jesse in *Wonderland* is afraid to acknowledge the depths of his own personality and the truth of his murderous father. The word "father" and the idea of becoming a father is an important secondary theme supporting the main theme of individuation in the novel, as its main character, Jesse Hart, flees from a murderous father, takes up a number of surrogate fathers, and ends by being a helpless, ineffectual father to his children. The father image is also linked to the congruence of the individual and history, for the seminal national tragedy of the Kennedy assassination mirrors the personal tragedy of Jesse's failure as a father. Oates points out that this is the first of her novels that does not end in violence. While the violence of its beginning echoes similar scenes in *them*, the inconclusive uncertain ending is a departure from the typical Oates tactic of liberating a hero through violence. The difference points to a shift in emphasis for Oates—an increasing concern with the power of the individual consciousness to

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make its own heaven or hell regardless of external events. Jesse does not perform a "liberating" act of murder as Jules does, for he is on the verge of realizing that the problem lies within his own psyche and not in the externals he sees as threats to himself. The absence of violence at the end of Wonderland, the moving scene of Jesse's recapturing his lost daughter Shelley, foreshadows Do With Me What You Will's more positive affirmative belief in the redeeming power of love. Shelley represents both Jesse's past and future, and Jesse's union with her is a tentative groping back into a communal world of loving and sharing from which he has purposely isolated himself. Thus, the cyclical pattern of the novel reinforces the ironic truth that Jesse moves closer and closer to the past from which he is trying to escape.

The following discussion of Wonderland will point out some of the similarities and differences to them and will show how it forms a link to the more mystical transcendent concepts of love and selfhood in Do With Me What You Will. The chapter will focus on the character of Jesse Hart, tracing his development from childhood through his adoption by the Pedersen family, his medical career, and his own unsuccessful marriage and failure as a father. Unlike Jules, Jesse is bent on self-oblation as he creates a series of fictive selves to mask the real Jesse—retreating into his wonderland of science.

The title of a strange Oates poem about the evolution of the self which appears at the beginning of the novel, "Wonderland" gradually assumes multi-faceted significance: it serves as the rather banal name of a 1960s' shopping mall—Wonderland East—decorated in "garish carnival colors" and cheap modern multicolored cubes and benches (p. 445); and the term becomes a metaphor of the confusing, often terrify-
ing realm of the self where fluidity and uncertainty govern. Oates thus links the geographical and the human landscape in her novel (the first section is titled "Variations on an American Hymn") as we trace the evolution of Jesse Hart from his childhood in the 1930s to his own fatherhood in the traumatic 1960s. Like Jules, Jesse is unmistakably an American hero, and his erratic progress to maturity becomes a paradigm of America itself as it passes from the Depression of the 1930s to the civil riots of the 1960s. His own family killed by an enraged, frustrated father, Jesse Hart moves through successive stages of selfhood in the novel, assuming new names and identities; yet the central question at the end of the novel—Who is Jesse?—remains unresolved. During the course of her novel, Oates has Jesse gradually accumulate disparate traits from the men who befriend him until, near the end of the novel, Jesse formulates his purpose in his own mind: "Jesse was a survivor. Jesse did not have a personality. He did not want a personality. His heartbeat told him always: here you are, here is Jesse, a survivor" (p. 346). Ironically, the elements of the past from which Jesse thinks he is escaping reappear again as he is in the end a frustrated, ineffectual father like his own.

The dilemma which Jesse faces in obliterating his past and escaping his biological inheritance forms the thematic center of the novel, until in the climactic sequence Oates brings us full circle: as Jesse had fled his insane, murderous father at the beginning of the novel, his own runaway daughter, Shelley, flees her father accusing him of wanting to kill her. Jesse's transition from son to father, the various lives with which he comes into contact, the many masks he assumes, are the subject of Wonderland—a mythical and literal place where Oates
explores the perennial problem of man's selfhood as he perceives it and as it is perceived by others.

We first see Jesse Hart in 1939 as a fourteen-year-old boy living in poor, crowded conditions in a house too small for his father's growing family. The figure of Willard Harte looms darkly in the background of these early pages—a man who craves excitement and escape, yet who is burdened with the weight of a family he neither wants nor can provide for. He takes long, midnight walks—aloof from his wife and children, all of them but Jesse blissfully unaware of his restless despair and anxiety; so too, later in the novel, will Jesse Vogel, the successful surgeon, take long, aimless walks, his head bowed like a hunted animal. The tension builds toward the climactic scene of the first section when Jesse discovers his family dead, killed by Willard Harte in a fit of mute anger and despair. In a desperate attempt to flee the bloody scene and his father's gunshots, Jesse breaks through a bedroom window, thus beginning a process of flight which will continue for the rest of his life.

Lying in a hospital bed recovering from a gunshot wound, Jesse becomes conscious of the uneasiness he inspires in the doctors, nurses, and the friendly neighborhood woman who comes to visit him. He dreads their stares, their fingers pointed at him, singling him out as a freak. There emerges in Jesse an intense desire for anonymity and at the same time a desperate gratefulness for the gift of life. His secluded life on Grandpa Vogel's run-down farm offers Jesse the chance to merge with the vastness of the land and sky: "Yes, he would forget; he would be lost in all this distance, this wilderness, the electric nervousness of his own soul neutralized by the silence of this old man and the
This vision of clean, open spaces recalls Jules's westward odyssey in them and suggests the frontier myth that permeates so much of American fiction. Ironically, the impersonality of the landscape that seems to offer a refuge for Jesse is an illusion, for the terrain of his grandfather's farm crystallizes into various spots recognizable from his childhood visits and redolent with memories. Running away from the farm because of a quarrel with his grandfather, Jesse feels betrayed by the old man, and believes that another phase of his life has just ended. As he hitchhikes in the direction of his home, Jesse has an uncontrollable urge to return there as if he needs to verify the bloody scene once more. Sitting in the deserted, blood-stained house, almost waiting for his family's return, Jesse imagines "a face... shaping itself out of the torn wallpaper, nicks and scratches and a deep tear that was like a mouth, a gouge of a mouth, his father's mouth, his father's staring face..." (p. 74).

A brief interval of living with an aunt and uncle ends with Jesse's trip to the Niagara County Home for Boys where he is adopted by Dr. Karl Pedersen—a scientist-cum-mystic who takes an interest in Jesse after reading of him in the newspaper: "Boy Eludes Gun-Toting Father." Eager to please Dr. Pedersen and eager to escape the orphanage, Jesse struggles to give the "right" answers to Dr. Pedersen's questions about his interests and ambitions. Dr. Pedersen's conversations introduce Jesse to a bizarre, heady world of abstractions, intellectual pursuits, and vague longings for success. The Pedersen episode is the occasion for some of Oates' finest writing, as she skillfully conveys the personalities in the grossly overweight Pedersen family: Karl Pedersen, a
well-known diagnostician with his own clinic and a clinical interest in Jesse as a freak survivor; Mary, his wife, a sweet-faced, meek woman completely dominated by her husband and isolated from her two brilliant children; Hilda, a thirteen-year-old rotund mathematical genius who gobbles candybars by the handful when she is asked to display her mathematical skills; Frederick, a seventeen-year-old musical genius who sits at the piano all day improvising and creating melodies, stopping only long enough to eat. Into this bizarre world steps Jesse, a skinny, scrawny boy upon whom Karl Pedersen fastens his hopes for the future.

Frustrated and disappointed by his own children, Pedersen steers Jesse toward a medical career, giving him long lists of books to read and report on at the dinner table. As he tells Jesse, his life is "incomplete. I want more. I need more to nourish me. I need another son" (p. 89). Dr. Pedersen gives Jesse a vision of Jesse's future that is almost unbelievable for the orphaned boy: "Already you are pushing into the person you will be, the future that belongs to both of us. Yes, already, already the future has begun" (p. 91). Jesse Vogel thus becomes Jesse Pedersen, part of a family, blessed with belonging at last:

Jesse could not remember clearly now what his life had been in the past. He had been alone, often. That other Jesse: pale, scrawny, much younger than this Jesse. That boy had died, perhaps . . . . Or, if he existed anywhere, it was on Grandpa Vogel's farm, out in the deep, vast, silent country. . . . (p. 95)

The frequent eating scenes in this section to which Oates gives so much attention become symbolic of the devouring power of Karl Pedersen. He
needs Jesse and the rest of his family to help him fill out his own image in the world, and the poverty of their emotional lives is ironically pitted against the opulence of the Pedersen mansion in which family meals become perversions of communal sharing and instead mini-dramas with Dr. Pedersen the chief actor.

Jesse finds himself yearning to be the person Dr. Pedersen envisions him, to fulfill the special destiny to which he has been called. In a speech revealing his totally selfish ambitions for his adopted son, Karl Pedersen says:

> I have been planning, imagining how you will grow up into my place, into my very being. It is a challenge to me, this shaping of you, Jesse, because you do not have my genes, my flesh has not contributed to your flesh. You are a total mystery to my flesh. And yet I believe I will succeed with you... Correcting defects of nature, modifying certain freakish twists of fate, has always been my specialty. (p. 109)

Jesse senses that he was not fully "created" until Pedersen spoke his name, and Pedersen's egomaniacal visions of Jesse's future gradually become Jesse's own. At one point in the novel, Jesse feels that somehow Dr. Pedersen's voice is contained inside his skull—a foreshadowing of his own daughter, Shelley's, accusation that Jesse wants to "be" her, to possess her.

Thus, the circular pattern of events in the novel reinforces the theme of inescapability; the similarity of places and events provides an ironic denial of Jesse's belief that he can erase the unpleasant elements in his history and begin again at each new juncture. Even a paper on memory that Jesse reads later in the novel at a convention of famous brain surgeons reiterates the inseparability of man and his
historical past:

It seems that events of the distant past are more firmly established in the memory, with no regard to their relative (conscious) significance or insignificance to the individual . . . Why should not distant memories be most easily extinguished? . . . Is it the function of the normal brain to hold the present cheaply and to honor only the distant past? (p. 441)

Jesse's attempts to help Mary Pedersen, his second "mother," escape from the clutches of Dr. Pedersen result in a further example of ironic repetition in the novel. Following his flight with Mary Pedersen to a hotel in another city, Jesse returns to the room to find Mrs. Pedersen gone--whisked home by the devouring doctor--and a letter from Karl Pedersen awaiting him:

Jesse:
With this check and with this letter I pronounce you dead to me. You have no existence. You are nothing. You have betrayed the Pedersen family, which accepted and loved you as a son and now you are eradicated by that family. Never try to contact us again. You are dead. You do not exist. (p. 199)

Willard Harte's abortive attempt to kill his son Jesse earlier in the novel repeats itself now in the actions of Jesse's adopted father. Karl Pedersen pronounces a death sentence on Jesse, thus leaving him orphaned of mother, father and family again.

The $1,000 check enclosed in Dr. Pedersen's letter is a kind of financial inheritance and becomes a parody of real biological inheritance; the metaphor of adopted children and foster parents emerges as a tragic commentary on modern man's loss of history. Jesse Pedersen
thus becomes Jesse Vogel, struggling medical student. First discovered by Karl Pedersen in the fiction of a newspaper headline, Jesse is summarily dismissed by the same man, shifting identities once again. Here Oates links Jesse's life to events beyond merely personal significance. Jesse's manhood (he is now twenty-one) is deliberately connected to the end of World War II, a period of reconstruction and growth: "He had changed his name to Vogel in 1945. Jesse Vogel. The end of the war, the beginning of Jesse Vogel" (p. 192). Jesse is now launched on a medical career—an ironic and indisputable reminder of his years with Karl Pedersen.

Jesse's medical school years are frenzied, austere, lonely, and he wanders through them "in disguise as a normal young man" (p. 204). Jesse sheds the excess weight he had gained while living with the Pedersens and emerges a lean, overworked much-in-debt young man who sickens at the thought of eating in the presence of others. He has a halfhearted, brief engagement to Anne-Marie, a young nurse; Anne-Marie represents a drain on his time and energy, yet he needs her for some reason puzzling to him. As one reviewer says of Jesse: "Death is no mystery to Jesse; love is the great puzzle." He begins to absorb the rhetoric of the various classes he attends in neurochemistry, fascinated by the concept of man's body as a perfect human machine. He has unplainable visions of "pushing himself up out of the sluggish confines of his body, his spirit emerging muscular and powerful and very sane" (p. 208). The language here echoes the earlier poem, "Wonderland," with its semi-mystical concept of man's evolution:

I make my way up through marrow
through my own heavy blood
my eyes eager as thumbs
entering my own history like a tear
balanced on the outermost edge
of the eyelid.  (Wonderland, Introduction)

Plagued by financial worries and insecure about his future, Jesse becomes more and more withdrawn from the real world, resisting other people and their perplexed responses to him. He begins to take for his watchword the scientific dictum, "control": "if he had control of himself, Jesse Vogel, then nothing else mattered in the universe" (p. 211). In a curious passage from this section of the novel, Oates has Jesse verbalize one of his nagging fears:

. . . he had the idea that his private memories fed somehow into a vast universal memory, a sorrow not his own that he had not lived through and therefore could not erase, even by the most intense rituals of thought—the confused sorrow that populated the universe, that constructed the universe. (p. 212)

Jesse is to find out in the course of the novel that there are indeed things in our lives that cannot be controlled as neatly as the elements of a scientific experiment. Yet, for the time being, he is still learning.

Jesse's years at medical school represent his methodical preparation for assuming the role of successful, compassionate doctor who will serve humanity through his work. As he confides to his friend, Trick Monk:

I suppose I want to perform miracles . . . but I want the miracles ordinary. . . . And I would like to do this impersonally. Out of sight. I
Jesse's evolutionary trek toward some imagined "self" unconsciously dictates his actions. His engagement and subsequent marriage to Helene Cady, daughter of the brilliant neurosurgeon Benjamin Cady, arises out of his compulsion to complete this image of himself as a future Benjamin Cady. Thus, Cady emerges as still another surrogate father: "How to become that man without debasing himself?" (p. 246).

When Cady questions Jesse about his family, Jesse lies shamefacedly telling Cady his parents were killed in an automobile accident a long time ago. It is as though Jesse fears being considered a freak if he were to reveal the truth about his childhood and his natural parents. He masks the uncertainty and insecurity of his origins by hiding under the veneer of promising young medical student and aspiring son-in-law of Benjamin Cady. Jesse's feelings for Helene Cady are motivated by his desire to control and consume her—to make her fit into the carefully structured pattern of his future: "... she would not meet very many men at all, she would not meet his colleagues, she would be his wife and the mother of his children and she would belong to him entirely" (p. 271). Jesse's desire to consume his wife's (and later his child's) ego is an ironic and inescapable "inheritance" from Karl Pedersen, whose massive ego allowed for no flaws in the master plan of his life. Jesse's inherited dilemma is a curiously paradoxical one: in one respect he has a fear and abhorrence of formlessness and disorder, yet
he also yearns for anonymity, impersonality in his projected future. Structuring his life becomes Jesse's last defense against the chaos that is rightfully his natural inheritance, but the chaos is never very far away as the final scenes of the book will show. Jesse's insistence on making a new beginning, on obliterating those unpleasant facts of his past, is an ironic commentary on the futility and inescapability of those very facts. Such blindness on Jesse's part results in his inevitable failure as both husband and father.

Jesse's marriage to Helene is characterized by a frustrating lack of communication, chiefly a result of Jesse's unemotional involvement with his wife and her own fear of being "completed" as a woman—of being a mother. The woman Jesse chooses to be the mother of his children is peculiarly asexual, submitting to his caresses out of a compulsion to fulfill her part of the marriage bond: "She was suspended in a fearful, cautious state, cautious especially of Jesse's love, as if surrendering to him would infect her with that coarse blatant bodilessness she hated so in other women" (p. 289). In a powerful scene toward the end of the novel, Helene drives around the city contemplating abortion, but in a dream-like trance returns to Jesse who is on duty at the hospital. Oates thus foreshadows Jesse's ultimate failure as a father by dramatizing his wife's death-wish and her desire to kill the child she is carrying.

As Jesse assumes the role of father to his two daughters, he also assumes a different and more prestigious professional role than he had hoped for. As Roderick Perrault's chief resident, Jesse knows he has been singled out by the isolated, egomaniacal doctor as his assistant, his second pair of hands in the complex neurosurgical operations he
performs: "When he operated under Perrault's guidance he felt his own fingers drawing out of himself, his deepest, numbest, least personal self, and out of the older man, power that was pure control . . ." (p. 335). Jesse consciously sets out to model himself after Perrault, copying his deft surgical technique and his cool impersonality toward his patients. Perrault, like Karl Pedersen, seems almost inhuman, curiously detached from the "real" world—viewing his patients as test cases to be reported on at prestigious national conventions. At a dinner party given by the Perraults, Jesse, seated between Benjamin Cady and Perrault himself, feels "like a son-in-law with two fathers" (p. 356). Oates uses this dinner party to bring into the open the various theories of personality which she has been exploring artistically through the situations and characters in the novel.

At the dinner party Perrault seems to speak for the three doctors present—espousing the detached, clinical view—while Helene speaks from the more emotional and humanitarian perspective. Perrault stresses the instability of the personality, the fact that it is merely "a conscious system of language. And when the language deteriorates . . . the personality vanishes and we have only the brute matter left . . ." (p. 359). Perrault's assertion that the personality is an illusion or "tradition that dies hard" (p. 360) shocks Helene. Her horror grows as Perrault theorizes about future brain transplants based on the theory that "a great mind doesn't belong simply to the body it happens to have been born in" (p. 363). She counters these inhumane assertions by saying:

You're serious about this, aren't you? . . .
It's the same as murder. . . . You're sick, a
sick man, you're crazy, you're a killer, and it's because you want to kill that you've thought all this out, you and men like you . . . you know that no one can stop you . . . (p. 365)

In this same conversation Perrault also expresses a truth that we have heard in them—the truth of the double or multiple self, the dichotomy between the public and private self:

We each have a hidden obsession . . . a kind of monster that has made our facial structures what they are on the surface, the facial mask that is our own, uniquely in the universe, and we try to keep this monster secret, except perhaps to ourselves. And some of us never see the monsters in ourselves . . . This is the personality people defend. (p. 360)

Certainly this passage elucidates what has happened to Jesse Hart/Pedersen/Vogel: the frightened insecure boy who runs from the blood-splattered house abandoned by his murderous father is now chosen, selected by an equally "murderous" father—Roderick Perrault—who wants to annihilate Jesse and extend his own surgical expertise through Jesse's fingertips. The devouring monster Helene sees in Perrault, Michele later sees in her own father, Jesse. By the time Michele writes her letters to her father, during the last section of the novel, Jesse has become very much like Perrault; in fact, he has even taken over Perrault's medical practice and is finishing his book. Michele and her boyfriend Noel at this point accuse Jesse of being a murderer.

The episode with Reva Denk occurs shortly after the heated exchange at the Perraults and provides an ironic commentary on it. Jesse's passion for Reva stems from his desire for assimilation and rebirth through her physical being, since she represents for him the ideal of woman-
hood—everything earthy and sensual that Helene is not:

He needs only to take this woman in his arms and bury himself in her, to forget himself in her, in the pit of her belly, in the most secret part of her being, to blot out his consciousness and to rise again inside her, transformed by the most shadowed labyrinthine secrecy of her brain, resurrected there . . . . (p. 376)

It is as though Jesse senses his own incompleteness and feels that the right woman could somehow fill in the gaps of his life—justify him, "redeem him as Jesse" (p. 374). But the affair with Reva is doomed from the start since she, like Helene, wants an abortion, and seeks Jesse out for this purpose. Again, the murderous instinct manifests itself not only in the men but in the women as well. As Jesse contemplates his mirror image shortly before his planned flight with Reva, he is afraid of what he sees. This scene is a reminder of the earlier passage in which Perrault refers to the monster within us all that lurks behind the facade. As he stands in the dingy motel bathroom supposedly cleansing himself for his imminent union with Reva, Jesse ponders the mystery of their love:

As he would penetrate her he seemed to penetrate himself, all the parts of himself, well-oiled and warm with a honeyish certainty, the cavities of his body aching to be filled as her body ached for him, his muscles straining to please, his organs swelling and pumping blood in harmony, in love. (p. 403)

But Jesse's fear of Reva's love and his reluctance to betray his past with Helene and his children prove stronger than his desire to "father" Reva's unborn child. In a chilling self-mutilation scene, Jesse stares at his bleeding body in the mirror and seems to derive
some pleasure from drawing the razor across his entire body, as if punishing himself for the proposed self-indulgence. He resists the temptation to flee with Reva and returns home, scarred and bleeding, to transfer his love from Reva to his daughter Michele.

The last section of the novel, titled "Dreaming America," includes letters to Jesse written by his runaway daughter, Michele (Shelley), and passages about Helene and Jesse at this stage in their lives. The spiritual emptiness Jesse feels and the alienation from his daughter and from all her generation are symptomatic of the times—the political and social upheaval of the 1960s. Jesse is paradoxically at the apex of his professional career but he is also forced to witness the fragmentation of his family life. His relations with Helene have become strained and awkward, and his possessive attitude toward Shelley has increased the distance both literal and figurative between them. Oates again links personal and social history, focusing on the Kennedy assassination as, in Jesse's words, "the beginning of something" (p. 412). Both Jesse and Shelley relive the day of the assassination—Jesse in his thoughts and Shelley in her letters to her father.

Shelley is eight years old at the time of the assassination, yet she remembers the confusion, the chaos, and her own uncontrollable screaming which Jesse felt helpless to stop. The jumble of events surrounding the killing has frightened everyone, but the impressionable Shelley reacts in a wild, inconsolable manner as though, in her child's mind, she has sensed the psychic disintegration around her—a disintegration and loss which will mark her adolescence and alienate her generation. Surely Oates is inviting us to link the country's loss of a "father" with Shelley's own eventual alienation from Jesse. Personal
and social histories mingle here; Jesse's long-standing fear of confusion and disorder is resurrected by the assassination, and his failure to console Shelley mirrors his own blindness to the confusion and disorder his aloofness has wrought in his own household. Jesse recalls Shelley's frenzy:

Shelley had been so frightened, so wild . . . . He had not been able to console her. Holding her, embracing her, trying to comfort her, he had felt with a terrible certainty the failure of his words, his touch, even the fact of his fatherhood . . . . what could he bring to this terrified eight-year-old, this pretty, feverish child? It was terrible that he should love his daughter so much and yet be unable to help her.
(p. 423)

As Shelley matures, Jesse's inability to reach out and comfort her, his distance and aloofness from her, gradually result in Shelley's increasing inwardness and isolation from her family. While Dr. Jesse Vogel, the public figure, is a professional success—a healer and savior to his patients—Jesse Vogel as father is a miserable failure, a cold, inhuman man who feels love but cannot show it.

In this last section of the novel, the various "fathers" Jesse has had merge in his personality and he becomes a living embodiment of the lives of all his fathers. Like his biological father, Jesse wanders aimlessly around his grey stone mansion, uneasy in his professional success and troubled by the failure of his family life. Just as his real father, uneducated and poor though he was, felt the difficulty of holding a family together, so Jesse senses the essential mystery at the core of love—a mystery that cannot be cut and probed or laid bare by
a surgeon's tools. Just as Shelley yearns for "freedom" from her fa-
ther, Jesse, finishing Perrault's book and carrying on his work, feels
the need to break free of the aloof doctor's shadow, yet he senses the
difficulty if not impossibility involved:

But I keep seeing him in my imagination. I keep
having conversations with him. After thirteen
years I can't forget. People work themselves into
the lives of others, into their brains. He exists
in me, in my brain . . . . It's as if he still
exists somewhere, but he's mocking me, he won't
come back to me. . . . (p. 439)

This concept of the ineradicability of the past permeates the entire
novel and forms the ironic core of Jesse's quest for self-annihilation.
As Jesse moves progressively farther from his biological roots, he
becomes paradoxically closer to the man who fathered him. Like Willard
Harte, Jesse's emotions are a mystery to him, and he is a puzzle to
those around him. Though he wins the grudging respect of his collea-
gues, Jesse remains elusive and brilliant—a conglomerate of those
traits he feared and misunderstood in his surrogate fathers. Even his
own daughter confesses her desperate need to be close to him, but the
fear and confusion she felt in his presence dominates:

You were never home, but when you came home
you wanted us there. Before you. Humbled
before you. I did not dare stand straight,
did not dare let you see how my body was growing.
I did not dare risk your eyes on me. Your
nervousness . . . oh I burned in the sunshine,
in the glare of your watching me; walking naked
in front of any man now is no task, no risk
for me, not after you--. . . . (p. 431)

Like them, Wonderland ends in the streets of a large city—in
this case Toronto in the Yonge Street district of dope addicts and runaways where Jesse has traced his daughter. Jesse enters Canada with a renewed strength and vigor, confident that Shelley is waiting somewhere for him since she "carelessly" mentioned the street name in her last letter to him. But, entering the crowded urban ghetto of Toronto, he begins to lose his courage and to feel curiously out of place among the milling crowds of disaffected youth:

Had he come so far only to lose her again in another crowd? . . . What good did it do, he wondered sadly, a life dedicated to explaining, to making an order of confusion—to testing, analyzing, diagnosing, correcting, curing?—What good did it do out on the street like this, bucking the crowds and the traffic. . . . His life, his very self: it would mean nothing to these people. They were wandering, yearning. Like a tribe of baffled, nomadic strangers . . . . (p. 492)

In this last sequence, Oates stresses the surrealistic qualities of Jesse's search for Shelley, and the relentless drive of his sense of personal destiny. As he scours the streets of Toronto, Jesse glimpses scenes that remind him of his own past and give rise to his reflections on his own life. It is as though in seeking to save his daughter, Jesse sees a possibility of perhaps saving himself, of putting together the pieces of his fragmented life:

Jesse tried to make out the horizon, but it was obscured by tall buildings that were in turn obscured by a haze of unwholesome, golden light. Was there, in that shadow-ridden heaven, another form of Jesse too, watching him, yearning to draw up to him Jesse's hollow, radiant, yearning self? Yearning to purify himself at last after so many years? (p. 494)
Ironically, Jesse's desire to "purify himself" takes on murderous overtones, as he stops in a cheap sporting goods store to buy new clothes—pullover jersey and khaki pants—and to buy a jacknife to go along with his gun. Throwing his tailored business suit and his wallet into a trash barrel, Jesse hopes to divest himself of any identity—the same hope he has nourished since childhood. Like Jules in *Them*, Jesse is prepared for violence, yet when he is faced with his daughter's lover, Noel, he takes pity on the defeated young boy and refuses to kill him. Noel's reaction to Jesse is curiously like that of son to long-lost father (the son Jesse never had?). He calls Jesse "pure," a "prophet," and admits he could love Jesse "the way I can't love your daughter" (p. 507). Noel's comments here seem a little artificial and forced, unwarranted by the situation and too sharply aimed toward making Jesse a conscious hero. Perhaps this weakens the ultimate impact of the conclusion, but the implication is that Jesse has at last found himself and that he has become a savior in the true sense of the word. At least Jesse is convinced that he has rescued Shelley and that he will never lose her again. But we, the readers, are not so convinced. The last pages are filled with references to the dying Shelley, with the implication that she too will escape Jesse as so many others have. The inconclusiveness of the novel is mirrored in the final scene of Jesse and Shelley drifting in the small boat, uncertain of where they are or where the water may lead them.

Jesse's search for transcendence through selflessness has been a desperate attempt and an unsuccessful one. The circular motif of the novel is underscored by Oates repeating a passage on the last page that we have seen earlier in the novel:
Where were they all going, these people who abandoned him? Was there a universe of broken people, flung out of their orbits but still living, was there perhaps a Jesse there already in that void, the true, pure, undefiled Jesse, who watched this struggling Jesse with pity? (p. 512)

Perhaps. The ambiguity of Jesse's life and quest remains unresolved at the end of the novel; Oates no doubt realized this when she changed the ending of the paperback version of the novel. Though it claims to "contain the complete text of the original hardcover edition," the paperback version of Wonderland has almost five pages deleted and two added. The final impressions left by the two versions are significantly different. The hardcover's ending is too pat and simple: Jesse retrieves Shelley for $500, has her bathed, extricates her from the forces that surround her and sets the stage for a possible reprieve as he takes her in a boat that is discovered at sunrise by the Royal Mounted Police. This, to me, is artistically unsatisfying as it makes Jesse a conscious hero or savior who is successful in his redemptive quest. The paperback version of the novel preserves the ambiguity so necessary to the modern hero's search. Jesse leans on his acquired skills to control the situation and keeps repeating: "Nobody is going to die tonight. No dying tonight. Not on my hands" (p. 478). For this, Shelley calls him "the devil . . . come to get me to bring me home . . ." (p. 479). Jesse asks, "Am I?" and with this comment the novel ends. Jesse's role as savior is called into question and the whole impetus of his life becomes problematical and uncertain.

Wonderland (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1973).
Thus Jesse's quest, like Jules's, is a continuing one. By making Jesse a distinctly American hero, a product of the Depression, a parent in the 1960s, Oates suggests that his tragedy is not so much a personal one of coming to terms with a fragmented history, but a cultural one as well. Jesse's predicament at the end of Wonderland is America's too.
Chapter III
Do With Me What You Will: The Self Awakened

When Joyce Carol Oates' 1973 novel Do With Me What You Will appeared, critics all agreed that it was somehow different from her previous work, though they could not agree on the reason. In an article in the New York Times Book Review, Calvin Bedient notices the novel's departure from what he calls Oates' "obsessive biological cynicism," and asserts that "what was hell has become a heroic arena where we 'fight one another, compete from birth till death.'"¹ Perhaps he comes closest to the truth when he calls the author a "potent mythmaker in the drab guise of a social naturalist."² J. A. Avant for Library Journal sees the novel as an "important change" for Oates: "Instead of the catastrophic scenes one expects, this novel embodies a view of regeneration. The book's central idea is one of transformation through law, ..."³ Another reviewer, on the other hand, interprets the novel as a story of "awakened human consciousness" and how this awakening can and must prove our salvation.⁴ What all of these reviewers have in common is a recognition that Oates is moving beyond her ostensible obsession

² Bedient, p. 1.
with the raw underside of life and affirming a more positive stance vis-a-vis the world. Words like "transformation," "regeneration," "heightened consciousness" all point to a different level of awareness present in the 1973 novel—an awareness that Oates herself comments on in the Book Club Edition of the novel. If we can believe an author's own statement of purpose or theme with regard to his work, without being guilty of the intentional fallacy, perhaps Oates' words can shed some light on Do With Me What You Will: It is "a love story that concentrates upon the tension between two American 'pathways': the way of tradition, or Law; and the way of spontaneous emotion—in this case, Love. In the synthesis of these two apparently contradictory forces lies the inevitable transformation of our culture. . . . Do With Me What You Will suggests such a transformation." 

This chapter will show how Do With Me What You Will embodies more fully the affirmative, optimistic attitude toward the individual and society that we saw glimpses of in the earlier works. In this respect, it is not categorically different from its predecessors. It is simply a more explicit statement of Oates' belief in the necessity and possibility of self-transcendence or self-awareness and how such awareness inevitably leads to the larger goal of institutional and societal reformation. Oates maintains through this novel that "American society will never be transformed by stray acts of violence in the streets—it will be transformed only through the courts. And they, in turn, will not be transformed until the men who run them are changed, individual

by individual." Oates' ever-present concern with social and historical forces and how they impinge on the consciousness of her characters manifests itself in *Do With Me What You Will* through the world of law and lawyers—a world curiously beyond good and evil where Kafkaesque scenarios play themselves out before our shocked, disbelieving eyes.

Elena's erratic progress to full self-realization takes place in spite of an ineffectual mother, a deranged father, and a power-hungry spouse who try to take her life into their own hands, leaving her a personality-less nullity. Her love affair with Jack Morrissey (a lawyer like her husband) and its liberating effect on her buried consciousness is depicted against the background of the 1960s—civil rights confrontations, court battles, and "free love." Her eventual union with Jack, defying all conventional moral precepts (she is married and so is he) can perhaps be read as a precursor of the synthesis Oates foresees between love and the law. The law Elena obeys is that of love—a yearning and obsessive need to complete herself through union with a man, regardless of the cost to others. The law Jack represents is the traditional legal code that has nothing to do with the "real" guilt or innocence—only with these categories as decided by a jury. Perhaps in the uneasy marriage of these two forces lies what Oates would hope is a cultural transformation based first on enlightened awareness at the individual level and finally on such enlightenment as it filters down to our social and legal institutions. Certain critical comments Oates made between *Wonderland* and *Do With Me What You Will* not only shed light on the 1973 novel, but also show the growing interest the

6 Book Jacket.
author had with what she calls "mystical" concerns. These concerns express themselves in the novel through the character of Mered Dawe, a wild-eyed advocate of love, peace and a Teilhard de Chardin version of consciousness raising. Finally, I want to show how typical Oates themes such as the search for a father, the congruence of the individual and history, and the process of individuation in the modern world culminate in *Do With Me What You Will* and point toward a more affirmative vision of the future of mankind in his heroic attempts at liberation and realization through love.

The epigraph in *Do With Me What You Will*, quite different from that in *Wonderland*, embodies Oates' redefinition of the world and our place in it. The epigraph to *Wonderland* is a typical Borges commentary on the unreality and irrationality of the world: "We have dreamt the world, allow[ing] it eternal crevices of unreason that tell us it is false." This dictum fits in well with the nightmarish dramatization of Jesse Vogel's dreamy course through the various identities others made for him. The novel itself ends on an inconclusive note--Jesse and his long-lost daughter drifting in a boat with no destination. Finally, the novel is not satisfying precisely because it does not resolve even temporarily the characters' conflict with the real world--not the world in their head. In contrast, the epigraph to *Do With Me What You Will* is from that arch-realist, Henry James, stressing the reality and inescapability of the world in words that are almost the diametrical opposite of Borges':

7 Epigraph from Borges, as quoted by Joyce Carol Oates in *Wonderland*.
The inescapable reality of the world we live in is a truth that the heroine, Elena Howe, grasps toward the end of the novel—a truth that shakes her rigid complacency and propels her forward on her uncharacteristically aggressive search for love and fulfillment. Hers is not an escapist solution; rather it is a carefully weighed decision to leave her artificial, sheltered world and take the risks involved in really loving another human being. The nature and power of love is a subject that Oates is always concerned with, since it is always necessarily connected with the individual's search for a cohesive, viable identity. In *Do With Me What You Will* the love between Jack and Elena is a transforming visionary expression of Oates' belief in the mystical interconnectedness of all human beings—a subject that she deals with in a 1973 essay on Flannery O'Connor.9

The essay, which appeared in slightly revised form in *New Heaven, New Earth* (1974) is a discussion of selected stories from O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge* in light of their relationship to Teilhard de Chardin's vision of the mystical interrelatedness of all people. An understanding of Oates' conception of the visionary artist's dilemma—how to suggest the unknown beyond the limits of reality and at the same time maintain contact with the real world—is crucial to

8 Epigraph from James quoted by Oates in *Do With Me What You Will.*

an understanding of her own work, especially Do With Me What You Will. The seeds of her huge ambitious novel are contained in Oates' essay on O'Connor; the essay points to the concerns that were engrossing her between Wonderland and Do With Me What You Will. Her own novels are attempts to achieve a synthesis of the world of external, gross reality and the world of internal, psychological truth in an attempt to convey a higher reality through the vehicle of often violent, bloody details. This is precisely what Oates praises O'Connor for—her ability to work through the "comic-grotesque," to present "flamboyant" and "heartbreaking" truths of the real world and thereby suggest "a dimension of experiential truth that lies outside the sphere of the questing, [10] speculative mind." The moments of revelation in O'Connor's short stories are her characters' momentary glimpses into a realm where they experience a wholeness and insight that is temporarily redeeming. In words that echo her own artistic methods and subject matter, Oates points to the healing power of violence in the O'Connor world and her realization that the way into the spiritual must be through the physical. [11] Such awareness of the important role of the secular, real world in the raising of man's consciousness sheds light on the beautifully rendered scene from Do With Me What You Will in which Elena's sexual awakening (and thereby her spiritual awakening) takes place. Having lived in a sexual vacuum all her life, refusing to open herself up to the surrender of sexual orgasm, Elena is sexually awakened through Jack Morrissey's love and given the impetus she needs to grasp a whole ar-

ray of thoughts and feelings that she has denied herself up to now. The violence and brutality of an Oates novel or an O'Connor story thus serve a vital function—in Teilhard de Chardin's words, the "rising of consciousness into a mysterious Super-life in which the multiplicity of the world's fragments are driven toward one another through love."¹² This experience of wholeness and interrelatedness was present only intermittently in the two previous novels discussed—in the love affair between Jules and Nadine in them and in Jesse's infatuation with the mysterious Reva Denk in Wonderland—but the major theme of Do With Me What You Will is the ultimate and inevitable awakening of Elena Howe from her spiritual torpor into a real and sustained relationship with her lover (and later husband), Jack Morrissey. He is Elena's link with the real world as well as the agent of her spiritual awakening.

Another aspect of Do With Me What You Will that surfaces in the earlier Oates essay is the author's rejection of egoism "as the last desperate attempt of the world of matter . . . to persist in its own limited being."¹³ Speaking of O'Connor's powerful The Violent Bear It Away, Oates cites Teilhard de Chardin's denigration of the humanitarian impulse which, when not spiritual, becomes merely egoistic. Lawyers like Elena's husband, the demigod Marvin Howe, and her lover, Jack, are examples of what Oates calls the "liberal, atheistic, man-centered society" dedicated to manipulating others in order to "save" them, to transform them into flattering images of their own egos."¹⁴ This is a

¹² Teilhard de Chardin as quoted by Oates in "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," p. 236.
¹⁴ "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," p. 239.
startlingly accurate description of what Oates dramatizes in her novel: the young Marvin Howe successfully defends Jack Morrissey's weak, ineffectual father against the charge of murder and in the process creates Jack's vocation to become a lawyer. Jack compares Howe's skillful recreation of the events of the alleged murder to the artist's manipulation of details to create a unified, coherent work of art:

One day I was his star, his prize, almost his son, and the next day he was gone. One day he'd known more about my father and the rest of us, the pathetic Morrisseys, than we knew about ourselves; he had created us--like a novelist writing a big crowded novel, with lots of room to keep going and no patience to look back--and no need to look back--...

Jack's admission that he felt almost as if he were Marvin Howe's son is a revealing comment on the nature of the legal profession and the power lawyers possess over life and death. O'Connor and Chardin see this kind of superficially "humanitarian" activity as essentially selfish because there is no love involved: "there is no merging of selves, but only a manipulative aggression." Oates also maintains that "this kind of love is deadly, because it believes itself to be selfless." The vividly rendered confessional scene in which Marvin Howe begs Elena not to leave him illuminates Oates' contention that the Law itself is incomplete, insufficient without the softening humanizing power of love to redeem it. Howe reveals for the first time his self-

ish need for Elena—a need that fails to take her total self into consider-

And so . . . I felt that I might be redeemed, 
Elena, in spite of my past life . . . which was 
a little ugly. You had nothing to do with it. 
You seemed to me entirely new, from the outside 
. . . Indeed, you came from the outside of every-
thing I had experienced, and you were so unnatural-
ly beautiful. . . . I remember how desperately I 
wanted you. . . . I am a convert to whatever you 
represent, and all my strength has gone into it, 
into you. . . . Because it really is my salvation. 
. . . (p. 553)

Howe's words call to mind those of Leo Ross, Elena's father, early 
in the novel as he tries to justify kidnapping her:

And the two of us are bound together forever now, 
by magic, dear, and not even your mother can des-
troy it. Not the lawyers, not the judge, not any 
court orders or injunctions—what has the law to 
do with love?—You and I transcend such declara-
tions, don't we? (p. 13)

Both Leo Ross (her real father) and Marvin Howe (her husband) want Elena 
for egoistic reasons—they need her to fill out their own emptiness, to 
save them. In a similar way, Howe needs his profession and revels in 
the sheer joy of playing God and of feeling his divinity in the City 
of Man where he can expand himself into the lives of other people and 
feel immortal.

Perhaps Howe's numerous references to his divinity elucidate an 
important difference between O'Connor and Oates that Oates expresses 
in her review article. While O'Connor insists on a rather sharp dis-
tinction between the physical and the spiritual—or, in Augustinian 
terms, the City of Man and the City of God—Oates is more secular in
her orientation, affirming the sacredness of the body because "it is the only means by which the spirit can attain its 'salvation.'" The moment of salvation in an Oates novel is not a religious experience but a psychological one, affirming the reality of this earthly world and our bonds to it. But in discussing O'Connor's work, Oates perhaps unwittingly uncovers many of the similarities between the two writers, and the ideas in her article on O'Connor are artistically rendered through the characters in Do With Me What You Will.

If we read the novel as the tortured progress of the heroine, Elena Ross, to full realization of her active role in the world and of her individual worth, the other characters in the novel align themselves rather clearly as either helping or hindering Elena's quest for self-realization. Indeed, one critic has analyzed the novel in Jungian terms, discussing how the process of individuation forms the narrative structure of the novel.\(^{19}\) Her article maintains that "the dilemma [Elena] has been chosen to exemplify, the struggle to create and retain a tenable sense of self, is a universal one in which every individual who achieves emotional and moral maturity participates."\(^{20}\) Elena's erratic progress to maturity can perhaps best be understood if we take a brief overview of the novel's structure in terms of time and space and see the carefully orchestrated continuum of Elena's development.

Rose Marie Burwell writes:

\(^{18}\) "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," p. 239.


\(^{20}\) Burwell, p. 93.
Although the four parts of the novel overlap in time, Elena's individuation exists in a continuum that is its structure. Part I is largely her story; from six weeks as the captive of her deranged father when Elena is seven (in 1950); through twenty-one years of another sort of captivity with her mother; and (from 1961) with Marvin Howe, the wealthy, sinister criminal lawyer to whom the mother has arranged Elena's marriage. Part II belongs to Jack Morrissey, who will become Elena's lover. Here the hostile, but powerful affinity between Jack and Marvin is revealed. Jack's work as a civil rights attorney permits Elena the contact with socio-economic forces to which she must ultimately relate, the *sine qua non* of self-creation . . . . The second section ends at the exact point in space and time as the first—with Jack and Elena's meeting on April 12, 1971. Part III, "Crime," traces the love affair between Jack and Elena which ends with her confession of the infidelity to Marvin and a mental collapse in March, 1972. The affair is the catalyst for Elena's first steps toward the state of psychological wholeness which Jung terms individuation. The brief final section, whose title, "THE SUMMING UP," in capital letters may indicate that this is what the novel has been building toward, includes a chapter for each of the characters who have formed the moral consciousness of Elena Howe—her parents, Marvin, Jack, and Meredith Dawe. Elena's chapter, the final one, marks her emergence from a lapse in the individuation process which occurred with her breakdown, at the end of Part III.  

With Elena's awakening at the center of the novel, the other characters fall neatly into the categories of either helping or hindering her quest for wholeness. The repressive forces are her father and mother and her husband Marvin, while the liberating forces are her lover Jack and the prophet of mystical love, Meredith Dawe. In many ways, Elena resembles Jesse of *Wonderland*, both drifting through life with no identity except what others give them. Curiously both Elena and Jesse are without a strong father figure to guide them. Jesse is gunned down

21 Burwell, pp. 94-5.
by an insane father and Elena is kidnapped by her deranged father—a kidnap­
ning that foreshadows Elena’s later "kidnapping" of her lover Jack
from his wife and child. In his deranged state, her father neverthe­
less manages to utter a truth that will inform the whole novel and that
will finally motivate Elena’s escape from the prison of self: "Love
transcends the law." These early scenes with her father establish a
pattern of behavior that Elena will follow through most of her life.
She is constantly told to be quiet, don't make anyone angry, forcing
her to repress her real feelings and act the part of her father's doll.
As she rides across the country with her father, Elena learns how to be
a mirror of other people’s emotions, how to please them, and Oates con­
veys the mental state of the frightened, passive child in italicized
sections set off from the regular narrative: "I was smiling like a mir­
ror, with his smile. I was happy" (p. 23). And later, after the police
find her lying on a filthy motel bed, dehydrated and malnourished, Elena
lies in a hospital bed and continues the posing and artificial behavior
that won her candy bars from her obsessed father: "The girl in the next
bed laughed. I took my hands away from my face and laughed the way she
did, like a mirror. Then she liked me. When I laughed like her she
liked me" (p. 41). Leo Ross loves the idea of his daughter, and stares
at her beautiful face greedily as her husband Marvin will do later.
Even in these early scenes we are aware of the latent power in Elena--
er beauty--a power that she does not use positively until the final
pages of the novel. Leo, like Marvin, does not want to scratch the
surface of Elena's beauty and find the reality underneath; he is con­
tent to stuff her with candy bars and deluge her with presents while
Elena weakens before his eyes. When he thinks of the prospect of her
growing up and becoming a woman, he is sickened: "It did not seem possible to him that this child would grow into a woman, an adult woman like her mother. . . . He almost recoiled from the thought, it was so shocking, ugly" (p. 14). Leo is motivated by a sick desire to get revenge on Elena's mother and by a need for the love and acceptance that have always been denied him. He forces Elena to play the part of "the good little daughter," the first of many roles she will assume in her life in order to please others.

Leo Ross also serves to dramatize the antithesis between the Law and love through his belief that he, as Elena's father, has been victimized by the law that granted custody to her mother. In a barroom conversation with strangers, the paranoid Leo reveals his misogyny as he discusses the vision he has had of "lying down with evil, in the body of a woman" (p. 29), a vision that forced him to perform the "cleansing" act of kidnapping his daughter. Leo's paranoia thrusts him into a confusing monologue about the relationship between the law and evil and his belief that "men's minds can't be legislated" (p. 28). He sees himself as outside the law because of his avowed love for his daughter, but in his deranged state he fails to see his real motive as vindictive revenge rather than real love. He writes angry, teasing letters home to Ardis (Elena's mother), daring her to try and find Elena. This initial appearance of Leo Ross rises to a climax as, drunk and defeated, he returns to the rooming house to find a police car outside and he knows he is defeated. He does not appear again until the final section of the book entitled "THE SUMMING UP," when the author picks up where we left him earlier, contemplating suicide in a drunken stupor. He reflects on the man he has been and realizes that "his fatherhood was
finished, his manhood finished . . ." (p. 472). His weakness and ineffectuality emerge as foreshadowings of Jack Morrissey's father's pitiful attempts to rebuild his life after he has been accused of murder. Both Jack and Elena lack the support and guidance of a father, thus forcing them both to adopt fathers—Elena through her marriage to Marvin Howe, and Jack in his infatuation with the same powerful man.

Elena's mother, Ardis, is a significant repressive force in Elena's life, for it is she who decides Elena's fortune is in her face and body and launches her in a modeling career. Since her kidnapping, Elena has retreated into a semi-autistic state, unable to verbalize clearly; as Ardis stares down at her daughter recovering in the hospital bed, she expresses concern not for Elena's emotional or mental state, but at the ridiculous idea of Leo's dyeing Elena's hair black: "... imagine, dyeing a child's hair black! Black! A child with that light a complexion, obviously a blonde . . . ." (pp. 44-5). Ardis is always concerned with appearance—what people will think—and Elena's difficulty with speech merely embarrasses her instead of making her realize the profound emotional effects of her daughter's kidnapping. Ardis and Elena pose for numerous photographers and this attitude of counterfeiting emotion carries through into her adult life. She becomes "the little doll" others call her, never expressing her thoughts or feelings, constantly being manipulated by others: "Men propped her up onto stools, tilted her face, shaped a smile with their fingers, left the smile, came back to it in a few minutes and reworked it . . . . She felt them but did not really feel them. There was a distance between them; she was not even threatened" (p. 53). Ardis is one of those shrewd aggressive women who bestows her sexual favors when it is in her best interests to
do so. She takes up with a succession of men who want to protect her and Elena, but she only uses them for their money and influence. In one episode early in the novel, Elena and Ardis change their last names to Karman, the name of Ardis's current "benefactor." Taking his offer of money and promising to drive straight to the house he buys them in Chicago, where he is to join them later, Ardis betrays Karman by taking Elena to New York instead—still with Karman's money. The promise of a stable home and family life continually eludes Elena as she lets Ardis plan their future for them. In the sections that deal with Ardis and Elena, Oates juxtaposes straight narrative with Elena's italicized interior monologues, thus stressing the psychological impressions made by the curious jumble of events in her life. Ardis wants to control Elena—she even tells her she can read her mind—and Elena knows she only has to sit and wait: "In the back of her mind, in other rooms, she knew her life was being prepared. She knew it the way she knew the rhythm of her heart: it kept going, kept going, it did not betray her" (p. 97).

One of the important image patterns in the novel is introduced shortly after Ardis arranges Elena's marriage to Marvin Howe. Elena is standing before a mirror with Ardis behind her, instructing her of her place "at the center of the world" (p. 101). Ardis tells Elena to think of the "famous statues made of stone . . . the peace in them" (p. 101). The image of fixity and immobility is of course directly related to the theme of the spiritual and emotional inertia that characterizes Elena's early life. Just as a statue is someone else's creation—an idea in someone's head before it is shaped into stone—so Elena is the creation
of her father, her mother, and of all the men who gaze at her with longing. Ardis reminds Elena that the gift of her beauty exempts her from the trials and sufferings of ordinary people and places her at the "center of the world where everything is at peace" (p. 101). Elena contemplates her body, thinking of it the way Ardis has instructed her:

I looked down upon my own body and saw that it had gone into stone, and the folds of my dress had become the creased folds of a gown. Such a body does not even need a head. I could see my own arms, what my arms had become, absolutely at rest. (p. 101)

After her marriage she endures her husband's passion by commanding herself, "lie still. Go into stone, into peace" (p. 159). Finally, the climactic scene in parts I and II is that of Elena standing before a statue of the nuclear family in the center of Detroit, transfixed by it--almost catatonic:

I went into peace and then I woke and it was later, time had gone by . . . . I had gone into stone like the statue in front of me: I had gone into peace . . . . Then I came back, I was frightened . . . . The other was peace and now I had to live again, I had to come back to myself in the world and live. (p. 311)

Rose Marie Burwell's article on Jungian aspects of the process of individuation in Do With Me What You Will points out that Jung found the rendering of a conflict into images of stone a human attitude related to the process of personality transformation, concluding that the unity of stone is the equivalent of individuation, that "stone is a projection of the united self."^22 Thus stone becomes richly symbolic in the novel,

^22 Burwell, p. 99.
for it is both suggestive of Elena's rigidly dictated identity and a foreshadowing of a possible united self in her future.

One of the conditions of Elena's marriage "contract" to Marvin Howe is that she cease all contact with her mother, Ardis, and be "signed over" entirely to him. Elena sees Ardis intermittently throughout the rest of the novel, at cocktail parties, on television as the host of a Detroit talk show, but Ardis's life is too full for her to worry much about her beautiful daughter. Once when Elena needs and wants desperately to talk to her mother, she calls Ardis--only to be "accidentally" disconnected. And at a party earlier in the novel, Ardis (now Marya Sharp) tells Elena: "at this point in my career I don't really want a grown-up daughter" (p. 139). Abandoned by an insane, drunken father and rejected by her mother, Elena is absorbed into the life of Marvin Howe and enters another phase of her sleepwalking existence.

Oates uses the scenes dealing with Marvin Howe as occasions to link his vocation as a lawyer--a "lord of creation," as one reviewer describes him--to his mental image of Elena Howe, his wife. Just as Marvin admits to the lust for power his job satisfies, so he uses Elena as an egoistic extension of himself--a beautiful princess, a possession like the many mansions he owns across the country. Early in the novel, Oates presents us with a revealing interview Marvin grants to a magazine in which he discusses his work, his motivations, his desires and his ambitions. What emerges from Howe's words is his childhood desire

23 Sara Sanborn, "Two Major Novelists All By Herself," Nation, January, 1974, p. 20.
to expand himself to the limits of his personality: "From the time I was a child I felt the world wasn't large enough for me" (p. 123). He has a faith that becoming a lawyer can satisfy his insatiable ego. Like Elena because of her beauty, Howe thinks he is somehow exempt from old age, death, mortality because he has "already lived so many lives" (p. 121). In words echoing Oates' own description of her role as artist, Howe passionately avows:

I've competed and fought and struggled and triumphed in so many lives, saving men from death, from long prison sentences, bringing them back to life again when everyone else wanted them destroyed. . . . And so in a sense I have lived a multitude of lives, burrowed more deeply into certain people than they did into their own souls, more in control of their destinies than they were themselves . . . . (p. 121)

This godlike conception of himself informs everything Howe does, but he selfishly uses the law, his clients, and his wife only to further expand his concept of himself, bending and twisting the law and the truth to serve his own purposes. The concepts of guilt or innocence as absolutes are meaningless to him, for he creates the guilt or innocence of a client by manipulating the minds of the jurors. Believing himself "beyond good and evil," Howe is firmly on the side of tradition, the law, the status quo, for as he says, "the tradition makes me possible, it makes my victories possible" (p. 124). Asserting that "the law is what's left of divinity," Howe makes himself into a demi-god and the law into his religion. Howe's secular religion emerges as he maintains: the law "will never be destroyed because there is no salvation outside it" (p. 125). Oates would perhaps elaborate and say that the law is not all we have of divinity—the rest resides in the body of a
Howe not only manipulates his clients and friends, but Elena as well, creating an isolated cocoon where she lives cut off from her husband's work and the details of his defeats and victories. She receives sporadic postcards and letters from Marvin's mistresses and throws them away, reluctant or unable to admit that Marvin has a life apart from their sheltered world. Elena's total lack of involvement in the real world is matched by Marvin's cool, detached progress from case to case—scarcely remembering the names and faces of those he has "saved." As he leads Elena through one of his vast warehouses of possessions they come to a pile of paintings--portraits of themselves given to Marvin by his various clients. He admits that he scarcely remembers them: "I don't recognize most of these people. Who the hell are they . . . ? Even my clients fade out of my mind . . . everyone fades . . . it's too much of an effort to remember people once you've finished with them" (p. 116). Howe's inability to remember the people with whom he was once so deeply involved is a reflection of his similar inability to see the "real" Elena. He is as much a prisoner of his public image--his constructed identity—as Elena is, and this perhaps accounts for the difficulty he has in accepting Elena's love for another man. Marvin has given Elena all of the superficial elements of a happy life--money, clothes, mansions--but he has failed to touch the inner core of her being, failed to accept the complete person Elena is. It is ironic that the man Marvin "created"--the lawyer, Jack Morrissey--is the agent of his downfall, both of them struggling for the same prize, Elena's love.

The fragility and insecurity of Marvin Howe's "kingdom" links him to that archetypal American, Jay Gatsby; like his literary ancestor,
Marvin— one reviewer notes— has created an existence at the center of which is a woman who remains a mystery to him, and who, like Daisy, moves on, leaving the man who made of her the image he needed to complete himself in the throes of a Kierkegaardian sickness unto death. 24

Oates dramatizes the collapse of Howe's dream world in the Las Vegas episode of the novel which ends with Marvin in a hospital bed being "brought back to life" by Elena. Later in the novel, Marvin really talks to Elena for the first time, telling her of the stag party he had attended and of his sudden, irrational premonition of his eventual death:

I wanted to run out of the room but I hadn't any strength or any consciousness of myself . . . . Everything in me went dead, suddenly dead, as if the bottom had fallen out of the universe, and I knew that I was going to die . . . and that everyone in the room with me would die . . . we would all die . . . (p. 554)

But Howe's fear of old age and death cannot be assuaged by Elena, for she has made her decision by this time to leave. Marvin's incredulous stare as Elena tells him she's not a "thing" crystallizes into his slow realization that the two people he has "saved," Jack and Elena, finally owe him nothing. They are not adjuncts to his successful career— complements to his inflated ego— but persons in their own right who have been brought together by a force even Marvin Howe could not control.

The force that draws Jack and Elena together is of course love— a kind of love that Oates describes earlier in an interview entitled

24 Burwell, p. 103.
"Transformations of Self." She characterizes this strange type of love as "totally irrational, possessive, ego-destroying." Calling to mind the scene in which Jack tries to kill himself and Elena in a freeway accident, Oates admits that this kind of love often "generates in one person (usually the man) the desire to kill the beloved, if the beloved can't be captured." Jules and Nadine in them were also prey to this kind of bizarre emotion that expressed itself in their scenes of frantic, violent lovemaking and culminated in Nadine's attempt to kill Jules. What attraction could the shabby, unkempt civil rights lawyer have for the wealthy Elena Howe living a life of enchantment in her Grosse Pointe mansion? Why does Oates choose this particular man to awaken Elena from her hypnotic trance?

In a sense, both Jack and Elena sprang from Marvin Howe's conception of them. One critic has pointed out that Jack was "seduced on the witness stand as a boy by Howe's power to create the exonerating myth, the way everything must have happened, his miraculous power to take away guilt." Jack is a timid, reticent teenager, embarrassed by his father's insane killing of Neal Stehlin and awed by the sheer power of the young lawyer Howe. Howe fills an emptiness in Jack that his own father could not or would not fill. It is significant that Jack, like Elena, is rejected and abandoned, at least emotionally, by his father whose favorite son is Jack's retarded brother. Jack's father kills

25 "Transformations of Self: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," Ohio Review, 15, No. 1 (Fall 1973), 60.
26 "Transformations of Self," p. 60.
27 Sanborn, p. 20.
the owner of a warehouse yard where his retarded son died, killed by falling debris in Neal Stehlin's workyard. Subconsciously adopting Howe as his "father," the young Morrissey begins to imitate his mannerisms, his way of talking and his cynical, matter-of-fact attitude toward the world: "He loved/hated Howe; he was too close to him, as if standing with his own face up to a mirror, so that he could not see" (p. 184). Jack's belief that his father is indeed guilty of the crime is countered by Howe's contention that Morrissey was temporarily insane, not in control of his actions. Jack wants to know the truth, but Howe tells him bluntly that he will never know. The verdict of the jurors will establish guilt or innocence--terms totally unrelated to the truth of an incident. In a moving, climactic courtroom scene, Jack sees the world as divided into "a great horde of ordinary people . . . and a very small number of superior people" (p. 198)--the superior group including only people like the judge and Marvin Howe. Once you have known men like these, you can never forget them. Jack feels a strong, growing desire to be a part of this superior group--to understand the mystery and power of a man like Marvin Howe, and when Jack takes the witness stand, still unsure of what he's going to say, he is skillfully maneuvered by Howe's clever questions--his halting responses slowly assuming form and sense under Howe's guidance:

Jack felt a certainty now, an absolute certainty. All this was true. And it was true really, though he had never expressed it in this way before. (pp. 210-211)

Jack falls under the spell of Howe's personality and of the law's power; his vocation as lawyer is established. Ironically, he will eventually
come to reject all that Howe stands for, as they both use the law for different purposes.

When he meets Elena, Jack has already served as a consultant to ACLU lawyers in Java, Mississippi—plunged into the 1960s' world of desegregation, race riots, Ku Klux Klan rallies, and boycotts. This second section of the novel has for its epigraph a line from Kafka: "I am a lawyer. So I can never get away from evil." The reference to Kafka occurs again later in the novel when we learn that Jack once read, without understanding, two books by Kafka—The Trial and The Castle. When he read them, Jack was firmly on the side of the protagonists, both of whom die, as one critic points out, "seeking to justify themselves to a remote, ambiguous, and sinister order (civil and religious law)."

Later, as Jack contemplates the fate of his clients who blindly oppose an entrenched social and legal system, he thinks a strategic retreat might have been better. But in the early days of his legal career and in his first acquaintance with the South, Jack is aggressive, politically naive, and short-sighted about his plans to "save" the Southern blacks and the United States as well. Jack expresses his idealism in a conversation with Rachel, a co-worker he is to marry:

The whole country is going to change. . . . An avalanche is on the way . . . breaking up things, walls, houses, people . . . making us all very close, like lovers, intimate as lovers or people who've bled onto one another. (p. 236)

In his desire to "make things happen" Jack is as much a prime mover

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28 Epigraph from Kafka quoted by Oates in Do With Me What You Will.

29 Burwell, p. 103.
as Marvin Howe, wanting to perform his messianic function for what he thinks is the good of the country and its downtrodden. Charles Shapiro sees a relation between Jack and Marvin as "archetypal lawyers, Howe living in the headlines, Jack devoted to the public good." He further points out the irony of Jack, specialist in lost causes, coming to represent a legal philosophy that is the "antithesis of the comfortable code lived by Howe." Oates' shift from the relatively isolated world of Marvin Howe and Elena to the intensely real world of Jack Morrissey reminds us of the montage of events that has been going on in the background of Elena's fairy-tale world. It is a reminder of the real world of pain, suffering, and death from which Elena's beauty has so far exempted her. Jack Morrissey's experiences as a civil rights lawyer in the South teach him the wisdom of patience, the frightening repercussions of prosecuting a white state trooper accused of killing a black teenager, and the folly of thinking he can singlehandedly change a social system that is centuries old. His impassioned plea to the black family of a murdered boy shows his naive but sincere optimism and his willingness to take risks:

I know how history freezes and needs cracking up, I know you can't wait for it to thaw . . .
I know that the system down here, the system is doomed, it's only a matter of which one of us gets in there first to break it up . . . . You want it to break down, don't you? Because it isn't yours, you don't own any of it, any of it, you have nothing to lose do you? When you own nothing, you have nothing to lose, do you? (pp. 244-5)

31 Shapiro, p. 27.
Disenchanted by his lack of success with the Southern blacks, Jack returns to Detroit as a Legal Aid lawyer, a little cynical about the law’s ability to effect any meaningful change in the world. The job with Legal Aid satisfies Jack’s desire to help people, and his marriage to Rachel forces him to be more practical and responsible about his previous idealistic schemes. His meeting with one of the legal assistants who helped try the black teenager’s murder case occasions his first glimpse of Elena—at a time when he realizes things are changing:

Since 1967 there had been a number of cases in the South for smaller and easier rewards and these had resulted in convictions against white Southerners in spite of the all-white juries, so times were changing gradually, the whole subject wasn’t as depressing as it had once been. (p. 256)

Rick Brauer, the legal assistant in the Mississippi case, urges Jack to come to the class he is teaching in "Law for the Layman" to see "something freakish"—a "thing" (p. 258). The "thing" he is describing turns out to be Elena Howe. When Jack learns who she is, he is shocked, not prepared to see this beautiful woman as the wife of Marvin Howe—his creator. But as he stares in at her, Jack feels a subtle revulsion toward her: "She was perfect as a glossy poster, without pores. He felt he hated her, yet it was a hatred springing out of him against his will, like the hatred of deformity: the way children hate the deformed, out of their terror of deformity" (p. 262). After this first glimpse, Jack finds himself inexplicably haunted by the vision of Elena Howe’s face and angry at himself for feeling what his pragmatism labels "wasteful emotions" (p. 264). Oates carefully foreshadows the mysterious love that will eventually draw Jack and Elena together by her frequent use
of terms such as "madness," "hallucination," "vision"—all words that refer to Jack's preoccupation with Elena's unearthly beauty and denote the anti-rational, bizarre aspects of their future relationship.

About midway through the novel and shortly after Jack's first glimpse of Elena, there is an important chapter (15) which explores in depth the character of Jack Morrissey--his philosophy, concept of his place in the world, and his vision of his ultimate role in history. It is a chapter which parallels in many ways the earlier Marvin Howe interview and one which serves to remind us that Howe and Jack Morrissey are both egomaniacs, though in different ways. Howe enjoys his public role and revels in the powerful image he has created for himself, while Jack takes on the poor, helpless lost causes for what he blindly assumes are humanitarian reasons; they are, in fact, egoistic methods of self-aggrandizement. Jack fights against his gnawing suspicion that no one is working the giant control board of the universe and he wants desperately to believe in "human control and direction . . . his own powerful will" (p. 277). He vacillates between a belief that blind chance is operating in the world and a conviction that he alone makes his life happen. His egoism and belief in himself defy the concepts of good luck and bad luck because "such a belief excluded him, his personality" (p. 279). The pivotal point that links Jack and Marvin in their respective careers is their firm belief in the law--the "absolute structure of the law" (p. 279)--and their realization that the law makes their victories possible. The law is indeed, to echo Marvin Howe's words, what such men have instead of God and their belief in its absolute existence gives their lives meaning and form.

Jack's successful acquittal of a twenty-three-year-old black man
accused of raping a white woman is a high point in his career, for it was based on his instinctive knowledge of the mood of the courtroom in Detroit, January 1970. By relating in detail Jack's questioning of the black man, Oates reminds us of the subtle personal, social and historical forces in a country just recovering from the racial crises of the 1960s. The forgiving, guilty mood of a white America reminded that it has been remiss in its duty toward the black population makes Jack's courtroom victory possible. He and his wife Rachel have frequent impassioned discussions about the state of America—its suicidal tendency and the way it forces people like drug addicts, anti-war demonstrators and other dissidents to destroy themselves. Rachel is Jack's "bright, unsleeping conscience," a strong, fierce, tireless woman who berates Jack for his selfishness and suggests he give up all the money his cases win him. Jack Morrissey, thirty-two and at the peak of his career, senses that something is wrong in his life, that "his victories anesthetize him to his own imperfection" (p. 284). He is ripe for the jolting ego-destroying experience of loving Elena Howe. He senses an incompleteness in his life despite his religion of law:

His life was a life of busyness, of other people, of shouting and plotting and worrying, and rejoicing too, in a very public way; it couldn't be true that, inside all this motion, this perpetual motion, he was really isolated . . . (p. 298)

Shortly before his first real meeting with Elena in front of the nuclear family statue in the center of Detroit, Jack is mentally rehashing one of his favorite arguments—his belief that there is a point in history "when a single event can tip the scales and alter everything"
(p. 301). While Jack is thinking in terms of political or social events, Oates is subtly preparing us for Jack's meeting with Elena--a meeting that in its own way is a pivotal event on a smaller scale, but just as "revolutionary" as its political and social counterparts. The revolution Oates is dramatizing is one of mind--a consciousness-raising that she believes can ultimately change the world. It is artistically appropriate that Elena is in a semi-catatonic state, contemplating the statue, when Jack sees her, for Jack will eventually awaken her completely from the half-life she has sunk into.

In this third section of the novel, entitled "Crime," Oates alternates passages of objective, detached narration with italicized segments relating future conversations between Jack and Elena after their marriage. These italicized portions amplify the objective narrative, often relating previously unknown events in Elena's life--notably her several suicide attempts. At their first meeting, Elena allows Jack to take her home, and for the first time she feels vulnerable and senses the aggressive danger in this man as he talks derisively to her about her sheltered protected life that makes it unnecessary for her to think. As she watches him drive away from Howe's stone mansion, Elena feels a "shadow-woman" stepping into her body, wanting to call out: "Why are you leaving?" (p. 321). But this time she retreats back into her shell, thinking of Jack often but lacking the courage to contact him. The image of a shadow will recur again in the novel, and Rose Marie Burwell sees it as a distinctly Jungian device that Oates uses to dramatize the inner conflict Elena must suffer. Burwell's article quotes this pertinent passage from Jung which perhaps sheds light on Oates' thematic and imagistic use of the shadow:
From this meeting on, Elena's life takes a decidedly different turn as she becomes more aware of herself as a person and more attuned to the realities of the world around her.

There are two significant episodes that frame Elena's imminent sexual awakening—both of which occur in similar surroundings. The first is a hasty trip which Elena takes to the California seaside. Instigated by her husband, the trip ironically initiates another meeting with Jack. The second occurs on the Maine coast, after Elena's orgasmic experience, when she has temporarily broken off from Jack and confessed her adultery to Marvin. Both incidents mark turning points in Elena's life—times of relative peace and calm away from the cities and opportunities for Oates cleverly to link geographical and mental landscapes in Elena's quest for fulfillment. The first trip to one of Marvin's California estates recalls Jules's westward odyssey undertaken in a burst of hope and enthusiasm about his future. Elena feels strangely free and elated, as she changes from her elegant city clothes to some shabby jeans and a pull-over sweater she finds in a musty attic trunk. Symbolically donning her new identity, she escapes from the watchful eyes of Marvin's bodyguards and telephones Jack in Detroit to invite him to meet her in a San Fran-

32 Jung, as quoted by Burwell, p. 96.
Cisco hotel room. This kind of positive, aggressive action is completely out of character for Elena and signals the upheaval that is soon to take place in her life. As she stands at the hotel room window looking out at the Pacific Ocean, Elena senses the steadying influence the ocean has on the "confusing, rather frightening hill" of San Francisco. It is as though her first glimpse of the ocean has shown her not only a panorama of ocean and sky but hinted at a similar uncharted space within herself—a need and emptiness that only Jack can fill. Their first sexual encounter is disturbing and confusing to her, but Elena is not yet ready or willing to give herself up to the abandon of sexual surrender. At the moment of climax, she feels herself almost taken up into Jack's frenzy, "but in the end he was too unconscious of her" (p. 347). Jack, in his selfish absorption, is not yet able to break down Elena's defenses and touch the real kernel of her self: "... she escaped him, she went into a deep, self-less peace, her consciousness of her own body emptied out and no risk" (p. 347). Jack has been similarly disturbed and shaken for after their lovemaking he utters words strangely uncharacteristic of him, and prophetic of the ultimate truth that informs Oates' novel: "You were really here, waiting for me. ... Now I don't need anything ... the rest of my life I won't need anything" (pp. 347-8). Their rendezvous in San Francisco has started a chain of events that will not end until Elena leaves Marvin's comfortable world and Jack abandons his loveless marriage—both seeking a liberation from the imprisoning effects of their empty lives. I think it is most important here to realize that the novel is neither a merely prosaic account of one woman's sexual liberation nor, as one critic maintains, "unquestionably related to the
women's movement in America."\(^{33}\) To say this is to distort and restrict the larger Oatesian vision of human liberation that we saw glimpses of in the article on O'Connor. It is also a story of Jack's awakening from his cynical, pragmatic world view—a mutual coming to life that he and Elena share through their ultimately selfless love for one another.

Oates comments on Jack and Elena's relationship in an earlier interview:

\[
\text{Do With Me What You Will is about the experience of this [mysterious] kind of love, how it is endured, and finally shaped into something civilized—marriage—but at great cost to the lovers and to other people. It is so essentially murderous that someone must be a victim, if not the lovers then innocent bystanders.}^{34}\]

Elena realizes in her second trip to the ocean that she must indeed take risks and unfortunately victimize someone in order to live her life with Jack.

After Elena's confession to him, Marvin takes the only course he seems capable of and whisks Elena off to another of his fortress-like houses, this time on the coast of Maine. His attempts to isolate Elena from everyone have ironic repercussions, for the quiet, tranquil atmosphere of the sea gives Elena time to reflect on her love for Jack and her relationship with Marvin. She becomes aware not only of her own recently awakened emotions but of the rhythms of nature and the ocean—the restless pull of a world from which she has shut herself off so long:

\[
\text{Elena had never really noticed the passage of the sun in the sky before. Now she was aware of it,}
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\(^{33}\) C. A. Denne, p. 597.

\(^{34}\) "Transformations of Self," p. 60.
sometimes watching it in fascination, in silence. She felt at times she was aiding that mysterious passage, somehow absorbed into it . . . her body seemed to move in its jarring, unpredictable rhythms, it seemed to open itself secretly, in a kind of sympathy. (p. 527)

Her temporary lapses into a passive state of retreat at Marvin's estate are disturbed by these frequent intuitive glimpses of the beauty around her and the growing conviction that she can no longer "go into sleep, into peace" (p. 530). Oates links the world of nature—the "summer universe" in which Elena is living—to the warmth and openness of Elena's newly-awakened emotions: "Her brain ached with consciousness, raw as the ocean, the slap of the waves, the screaming of the birds—nothing that could be imagined or controlled" (p. 530).

Intensely alive, honest and vulnerable, Elena can no longer passively submit to the unwanted caresses of her husband, and she comes to realize the truth of the Jamesian epigraph to the novel: "She realized that everything is awake, the universe is awake; that it cannot be escaped" (p. 531). Tension builds in this final section until Elena breaks out of Marvin's clutches and leaves him, taking nothing with her but the clothes she is wearing and some hastily-flung money of Marvin's. Elena's mind is awake not only to the rhythms of nature and her desire for her lover's caresses but to the whole world—to the currents of emotion that flow from person to person and join us all together in the larger human community. In words that echo Teilhard de Chardin's vision of a mysteriously united universe, Oates describes Elena's solitary walk through the small Maine town away from Marvin and his isolated world:

... she saw people clearly: she felt the nets of their consciousness, their seeing her, noting
her . . . it was not possible for her to walk 
past them in her old, lovely, enchanted sleep 
. . . as she had for so many years . . . (p. 540)

Walking alone contemplating the active battle she must wage for Jack's love, Elena recalls the mystical awakening of her first orgasmic experience—an awakening that started her present journey toward self-realization.

Elena and Jack had been driving aimlessly around the outskirts of Detroit, finally ending up on Belle Isle, parked on a deserted forest road. Oates is graphic in her description of their lovemaking, but what makes this scene different from the earlier meetings is Jack's unselfish attention to Elena and her needs. He is eager to make love, and yet he holds himself back from Elena until she too can experience the pleasure he does: "She felt him hesitating, she felt in him almost a withholding of words, of his usual strength" (p. 383). Oates describes the two lovers in appropriately mystical terms, elevating them almost to a mythical dimension: "They struggled together, to become one thing, as if the awful burden of holding the universe together were theirs" (p. 384). This scene represents an irreversible point in Elena's life, after which nothing is the same. She returns to Marvin, only to feel that their bed has become "a common grave." Elena becomes conscious of her own mortality—of the fact that she must die one day despite her beautiful face. But the struggle toward selfhood is not easy for Elena and she longs to forget the forces Jack has unleashed in her: "She had not the strength to keep herself whole. She wanted to give up, to surrender into parts, pieces, chunks of herself. Then she could rest" (p. 405).

The final catalyst in Elena's ultimate evolution as a responsible, thinking adult is her acquaintance with Mered Dawe, the twenty-seven-
year-old, wild-eyed advocate of a mystical "light love" that he believes can ultimately transform the universe. A typical child of the 1960s, Dawe is in danger of losing his life for possession of three marijuana cigarettes. Jack is chosen to defend him, and though he usually dismisses Dawe's philosophy as ridiculous and impractical, he is strangely attracted to the youth's preaching: "About Mered Dawe I have nightmares, yes, but also sudden flashes of certainty—almost mystical feelings. I sometimes think he might be right . . . that he represents a new voice, a genuine new voice, that the country is going to listen to . . ." (p. 414). Elena, too, is drawn to the frail, thin ascetic youth who believes that the salvation of the world lies in pure communication among people. He is the antithesis of Jack's hardheaded, legalistic approach to the world, but both Jack and Elena recognize the truth of what he says and they wish that the world could operate according to his principles. Dawe adds a mystical dimension to the novel, and is perhaps intended to be the voice of the future—espousing and believing in an imminent transformation of spirit that Oates herself spoke of in an earlier interview. The character of Mered Dawe unites the two fundamental Oates themes of the primacy of the individual consciousness and the congruence of the individual and history, for he is the advocate of a national consciousness raising—of an increased level of awareness in America. By including Dawe in the final section of the novel, Oates adds a historical dimension to an otherwise quite personal awakening of Elena Howe and voices her belief in an eventual national transformation stemming from ordinary individuals like Jack and Elena. Dawe's visionary schemes and his distinction between "light" and "heavy" love point to a time when we can be selfless and free of the compulsion to fight
and make war against each other:

Light love draws us up into the galaxy, which is ninety percent personality-free . . . but heavy love drags us down into the mud of self and the great mud of wars, of which all U. S. wars including the present war are merely temporal phenomena. Down in the mud we fight one another, compete from birth till death; in the galaxy we are free of that tragic struggle. . . . (pp. 420-21)

Dawe's ability to shake such individuals as Jack Morrissey out of their cynical complacency is a testament to the latent optimism and hope for America that Jack has. Jack forms a kind of bridge or link between Elena and Mered, for he believes in both the power of individual love and this love's eventual power to transform our nation. If Jack begins by believing there is no salvation outside the law, he ends by qualifying this belief with a conviction that the love between human beings can also save us. Elena and Mered draw Jack out of his cynical isolation and bring him back into the larger human community. Like his literary ancestor Jack Burden, Morrissey is able to shoulder the weight of his past and of his country's, and move forward into the future with renewed faith in himself and in the power of the human race to do good. His is a more powerful and sustained affirmation of faith in himself and others than Jules's, for Oates has moved forward in her depiction of love and how it can be "civilized." The revolution in America must first be one of consciousness, as Oates expressed in this huge, amorphous novel, but the time is not yet ripe for a Mered Dawe, and the novel leaves him crippled and insane in a mental institution writing Kafkaesque love letters to the judge who sentenced him.

Despite his ineffectuality in the larger world, Dawe has stirred
Elena and Jack to hope for something better than the realities of the world—something that can perhaps be captured in the love between man and woman. Jack tells Elena late in the novel of his "vision" of a different kind of city:

... I have an idea, a feeling, about another kind of city that isn't Detroit. ... But Detroit could be transformed into it. ... I can imagine it. ... I can imagine my own life here, back to my childhood, lived out in a parallel way, a ghostly alternative life, a different world . . . . (pp. 440-41)

Despite these hints of a better world, for the time being Jack and Elena must content themselves with living in this world which, to paraphrase James again, can neither be forgotten nor denied nor dispensed with.

In the love between Jack and Elena, Oates is perhaps prefiguring that union or synthesis of the Law and love that she foresees as the eventual hope of our country. Elena's struggle for selfhood in the novel can be any man's quest for wholeness as he struggles against often repressive societal and familial forces. What Oates has done is render into artistic terms complex social and moral questions that perhaps can never be resolved in the world as we know it, but as she shows, the attempt at resolution is itself quite often heroic. In *Do With Me What You Will* we have moved from the slums and ghettos of *them* or *Wonderland*, but the poverty of spirit these individuals must fight against is constant. Oates' interest in the process of self-realization takes on a new twist in this 1973 novel, for she is more explicitly linking the future of America to a heightened individual consciousness. Yet she is a cautious visionary, recognizing along with James that we
are fated to live in this world, even though our most intense life takes place in the mind. We must earn what salvation we can through accepting and coming to terms with the real world, as Jack and Elena learn, but the vision of a better world, our often irrational hope, is what makes this life bearable.
Chapter IV

Marriages and Infidelities and The Goddess and Other Women: Variations on the Theme of Selfhood

Joyce Carol Oates published two volumes of short stories during the period 1972-1974: Marriages and Infidelities (1972) and The Goddess and Other Women (1974). Both volumes appeared after Wonderland (1971), and both include stories that show Oates' handling of themes we see in her longer works. The stories are interesting and illuminating because they are a scaled-down version of the major Oates concerns, often echoing or anticipating ideas that are treated at length in the novels. It is as though Oates were testing her ability to handle certain themes in short stories before giving them extended analysis in longer works.

Seen as a whole, the stories I have chosen for discussion approach the problem of selfhood in various ways, sometimes stressing the congruence of the individual and history as a subsidiary theme, sometimes concentrating solely on love relationships that help to fulfill one's image of himself or point out the inadequacy of one's self-concept. These stories, then, do not represent a culmination of Oates' thematic and stylistic development, though there are stories in each volume that show her later mystical overtones; rather, they support and give added weight to my contention about the central emphasis in the Oates canon: a concern with the process of individuation as it is often reflected by the congruence of the individual and history, and a belief in the power of individual consciousness to transcend or at least make bearable the bitter realities of existence. While there are stories in each book
that are quite obviously experimental in form and style, I did not choose any of these because they do not, in my opinion, represent Oates at her best. She is a master of the traditional short story form, and the stories I chose fall into this category. The stories written in the period 1972-1974 illustrate Oates' attempt to, in her own words, "not just dramatize nightmares but show a way of transcending them."\(^1\)

The three stories from the earlier volume, *Marriages and Infidelities*, are all variations on the theme of marriage and betrayal—but not marriage in the accepted sense of the word. Oates uses the term "marriage" as a metaphor of union or completion—a joining with another individual whether in fact or fantasy that suggests the possibility of true understanding and communication among people. This type of "marriage" suggests an alternative to isolation and self-absorption—a world of communal value where the individual can locate some meaning in the chaotic realities around him. When Oates speaks of Flannery O'Connor's "transcendental world of absolute value beyond the cheap, flashy wasteland of modern America,"\(^2\) she is referring to one of her own thematic concerns as well. The characters in the three stories I have chosen from *Marriages and Infidelities* have glimpses of this transcendent realm, whether located in the world of political activism ("Did You Ever Slip on Red Blood?"), love ("The Lady with the Pet Dog"), or art ("The Sacred Marriage"). Each of these three stories deals with a different Oates concern related to the individual's search for self:

\(^1\) As quoted by Walter Clemons, "Love and Violence," *Newsweek*, December 11, 1972, p. 73.

the first with the congruence of the individual and history; the second with the development of an illicit, adulterous love affair by two lonely and isolated people in an attempt to achieve some measure of permanence; and the third with the quasi-mystical "marriage" of a man to his art. While all three of the selected stories first appeared in 1972, I have arranged them in an order moving from the most realistic and timely to the least realistic and consequently most visionary. Though each of Oates' short stories, because of its necessarily limited scope, deals with one main facet of selfhood, we can begin to see the novels as ambitious and amazingly successful attempts to combine several of these related themes into a cohesive whole. Thus the seeds of the novels appear first as the brief treatment of individual themes in Oates' short fiction.

"Did You Ever Slip on Red Blood?" is the story of Robert Severin, Vietnam draft resister and ineffectual revolutionary, and the effect he has on two painfully ordinary Americans—Marian, the red-cheeked, freckled-face stewardess on the plane Robert threatens to blow up, and Oberon, the FBI marksman hired to kill Severin as he leaves the plane. Marian and Oberon become lovers—drawn together by the bizarre series of events that connects them with Severin—but their love is haunted by the "pale, waxen" face of the young rebel. Severin disturbs their complacent optimism, and his death resurrects their hidden doubts about their own future as Americans. In this story, Oates deals quite explicitly with the individual as he is related to a historical framework, using

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the metaphor of "marriage" to suggest that Marian and Severin, despite their external differences, are brother and sister under the skin—children of the same amorphous sprawling America.

The second story I have chosen to discuss in "The Lady with the Pet Dog"—a tale of marital infidelity that has some similarities to the later novel, *Do With Me What You Will*. Anna and her lover are partners in the crime of adultery (as were Jack and Elena), sharing a murderous kind of love that each desperately needs to define himself. Anna realizes at the end of the story—in an O'Connor-like revelation—that she is bound to her lover in a true "marriage"—one of spirit and not of law. They share a common destiny in that they are agents of each other's redemption, catalysts for the secular salvation Oates so often suggests in her love stories. The shadow motif with its Jungian suggestions that we see in *Do With Me What You Will* appears briefly in the story as an illustration of the role-playing Anna is forced to do in her real marriage.

The last story I discuss from *Marriages and Infidelities* is called "The Sacred Marriage," and as the title suggests, it treats still another type of marriage—one occasioned by the love men have for their art. The death of Connell Pearce, a famous but eccentric poet, is the catalytic event that draws one of his admirers, Howard Dean, to the decrepit mansion inhabited by Pearce's young widow. The story unfolds as a kind of fairy tale based on enchantment, as Dean is seduced by Pearce's widow—one in a series of such planned seductions of Pearce's young admirers in an attempt to perpetuate the poet's memory beyond the grave. Howard Dean awakes from his spiritual torpor through his love for Emilia Pearce, and her betrayal of him at the end of the story only
serves to renew his commitment to the memory of Connell Pearce. The story is a beautifully orchestrated tale of Dean's growing self-awareness set into motion by the "sacred marriage" he contracts with Emilia Pearce. Oates expressed the mystical way in which one man's art can shape and give meaning to another's life. There are eerie echoes of the mystical father-son relationships Jesse encounters in Wonderland as we see Howard Dean gradually "become" another version of Connell Pearce—linked to the dead poet by the other-worldly figure of his beautiful wife.

The second volume of short stories, The Goddess and Other Women, appeared in 1974, after the last novel I discuss, Do With Me What You Will. The focus of the 1974 volume, as the title suggests, is the various roles women assume, either by choice or coercion, and the consequent recognition or denial of self such roles occasion. Robert Phillips discusses the stories in a Commonweal article in which he observes that the women in the stories are "manipulated by unfeeling men."4 The result is, as he asserts, "that these women do not feel real."5 Such statements might lead one to expect another volume of self-pitying feminist diatribes against male domination of women, but the book is in fact much more. Though the stories often lapse into the familiar pattern of repressed woman against selfish, unfeeling man, the overriding concern in each story is with that transcendent realm of absolute value that lies above the trivial details of a supposedly chauvinistic world.

5 Phillips, p. 55.
Nora Drexler in the story "Magna Mater" is a woman victimized by a cold, aloof father and an unfaithful husband, but she too is a victimizer as she retreats into her world of scholarship and teaching, raising a neurotic son who shares Nora's feeling of intellectual superiority. Nora's transcendent realm is art—her other dimension in which she becomes a consciousness entirely freed of body. The tragedy of Nora Drexler is that she fails to realize her self-imposed isolation—the artificial world she has created for herself and her son Dennis. Oates is no feminist, for she skillfully creates women who can destroy as well as suffer at the hands of men. Nora Drexler is such a woman.

"The Daughter" explores a second role women must assume; it is a story of the complex relationship between a mother and daughter and the daughter's love for her stepfather. Alfred Kazin remarks that Oates once said she is always writing about love—"an attraction of person to person so violent that it expresses itself as obsession and takes on the quality of fatality." 6 "The Daughter" deals with this kind of doomed love of daughter for stepfather and with the daughter's realization that, unlike her mother, she is fated to love but not to be beloved. The transcendent dimension here is the pure, selfless love the daughter has—a kind of love which her mother cannot or will not give. Oates skillfully shows the daughter's growing awareness that she is a different person from her mother, a separate and distinct individual with a desperate need for love that her mother does not have. Recognizing the subtle and inevitable rivalry between herself and her mother becomes a traumatic, maturing experience for the daughter, as she forever turns

her back on her lost childhood and faces the future as a woman.

The last story discussed from The Goddess and Other Women, entitled "The Goddess," concentrates on a woman's attempts to break out of her sheltered, privileged world as the wife of a wealthy man, and to assert her own worth as a person. Claudia in "The Goddess" is reminiscent of Elena Howe; they are both women whom money has insulated from the real world. A moving final scene describes Claudia's irrational happiness as she has a revelation of her invisibility and of the hidden thoughts, feelings, and desires that constitute her "other" life. Despite her role-playing in a loveless marriage to a despotic husband, Claudia feels secure in the knowledge that no one can see or know the "real" Claudia. This secret life is her salvation. In a 1973 interview Oates speaks of her attempts to "get beyond the pain" in "her most miserable, self-obsessed stories . . . by stating the terrible, obvious fact that in the midst of miseries, people are very often irrationally, quite happy." Such is the fate of women like Claudia or Anna in "The Lady with the Pet Dog"; their irrational happiness constitutes not just the author's attempts as artist to get beyond the pain, but her characters' too—which brings us full circle to Oates' ever-present emphasis on states of mind or consciousness.

The secular salvation of an Oates character often depends on the power of the mind to create another world that can counter the real world and serve as escape. But this is only a temporary solution, as we saw in Do With Me What You Will. Somehow we must be able to combine

7 Joyce Carol Oates, "Transformations of Self: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," Ohio Review, 15, No. 1 (Fall 1973), 58.
our "secret" life and our real life into a workable whole, which is another way of saying we must be a whole person willing to face the often painful facts of our existence and to take risks. The stories discussed in this chapter all end with some character's revelation about himself or his world—a revelation which he is free to ignore or accept. Ignorance spells inevitable disaster, while acceptance points the way to the Oatesian vision of a society transformed first through its individual members.

"Did You Ever Slip on Red Blood?" is a 1972 story that deals with the strange love/hate relationship between a man (Oberon) and a woman (Marian) brought together by a person whose way of life seems totally alien to theirs (Robert Severin). The precipitating event in the story is Robert Severin's attempted hijacking of the Pan American plane on which Marian Vernon is stewardess. Oates carefully contrasts the personalities of Marian and Robert early in the story to prepare us for their eventual conflict on the plane. Marian is a freckled-face, healthy twenty-two-year old who has always been popular and happy, facing life "with a constant smile" (p. 343). As her lover Oberon later observes, Marian only seems real when he is with her. As soon as he leaves she begins "to fade back into that neat smiling little stewardess with the uniform, the short skirt, and tight-fitting, buttoned little jacket . . . ." (p. 346). She has never had time for newspapers or television, so her life has been isolated from the real world of news and catastrophes. Into her narrowly circumscribed surroundings comes Robert Severin, a "weasel-like," "nervous" (p. 339), somewhat melancholy young man who has been acquitted of charges of draft evasion. Unlike Marian, Severin has always been a misfit and a loner with a cynical attitude toward life
and a disturbing habit of observing his actions as though he were a character on the screen:

His mind flashed its thoughts like pictures on a screen, and one of the thoughts was Robert Severin. Always alone. Walking somewhere quickly, alone. Since his boyhood he had imagined himself as a character in a film, a figure pacing across a screen, blown up, enlarged, exaggerated. (p. 340)

Severin's disconcerting tendency toward self-parody emerges from his bewilderment at not being able to make others like him and is thus a convenient defense mechanism for him to adopt. His one affirmative action in the name of his beliefs—refusing to fight in Vietnam—ironically ends in his being the only one of four defendants acquitted. Even his government does not take him seriously. But the memory of the ineffectual, alienated Severin haunts Marian Vernon for the rest of her life.

On the surface, there would seem to be no similarities between the Pan Am stewardess with her plastic grin and the misfit, unattractive Severin who has always been a loner. And yet three times in the course of the story Oates refers to them as "like brother and sister" (pp. 342, 354, 357). The suggestion is, of course, that Marian and Severin are both Americans, children of America who, under different circumstances, might have been lovers, or at least friends. Severin himself makes the connection between the government and men like his father—both representatives of law and order and the life of the good citizen that Marian has always lived. In one of his disturbing "visions," Severin sees his father "stretched out flat, the face stretched out like a big welcome mat, the bumpy hilly terrain of the United States, all someone's face"
Robert Severin fears his father, and has paranoid suspicions about the FBI men who spy on him, but basically, like most Americans, he still cherishes the belief that he "could make anyone like him if he tried" (p. 354).

After his acquittal, Severin wanders aimlessly across the country into Canada and grows increasingly isolated, hounded by FBI men and obsessed with the idea of blowing up the country. Severin sees his projected violence as a necessary cleansing, liberating act—as violence so often is in Oates' stories and novels. His death wish and desire to "clean himself in the sun" (p. 353) bring Severin to the Pan Am airplane and his encounter with Marian. Throughout the story, Severin has been viewing himself as a character on the screen—someone whom people will watch with attention. The profile Oates gives us of Severin fits in with the typical attention-starved personality of the political assassin or hijacker—a non-descript, lonely misfit who wants to be on center stage for once in his life:

He knew that people were watching him, from inside the hangars and from behind the steel fences; perhaps a camera crew was filming this... Robert Severin centered on a screen.
Robert Severin centered in a telescopic sight.
(p. 358)

Severin's desire for peace and nullity is satisfied by Oberon, the FBI marksman flown in to kill him.

Like Marian, Oberon has a healthy, all-American look—an amiable, anonymous face that often causes him to be mistaken for strangers. He realizes that Severin has only been subpoenaed as a "dummy" defendant in a draft case—that the government really has no use for him at all.
And yet the seemingly unimportant figure of Severin is destined to haunt Oberon as it does Marian.

Oberon falls helplessly in love with Marian from his first sight of her through the telescopic lens of his gun—that "white, gasping face of hers" (p. 360). He saves her from Severin, and she is grateful and in awe of him, ready to accept him as her lover when he appears at her door, even though the link between them is the murderous spilling of Robert Severin's blood. Severin's memory draws Marian and Oberon together in their passionate embraces, and it also disturbs their formerly complacent lives. Just as Mered Dawe provided a link between Elena and Jack, filling a need both were reluctant to recognize, so Severin draws Marian and Oberon out of the ranks of the ordinary into the company of those who have "slipped on red blood." Oberon makes the revealing comment toward the end of the story that he has killed people before, but "never an American" (p. 360). The revelation both Marian and Oberon have at the end of the story is the shattering realization that they are not really sure who Severin was. Was he friend or enemy? Was he a representative of a way of life so totally alien to theirs that it could erase the fact that we are all brothers under the skin? Surely the implication is that Severin and his private revolution have shaken up the smiling, optimistic lives of people like Marian and Oberon and forced them to reevaluate their roles as public servants. The public self they have chosen to show the world is a sham—no longer adequate to express the reality underneath. Oberon compares Marian's "mechanical little smile" to the uniform she wears—both a joke, "a horror" (p. 346). And his frequent glimpses of himself in mirrors also show him only his public face, "which was like Marian's uniform" (p. 347). The disparity
between their public and private images surfaces toward the end of the story as they lie in bed, both thinking of the violent death that has brought them together:

. . . they embraced, closing their eyes upon a fast shocked image of Robert Severin's face. He was a stranger and yet they were close to him, intimate, knowing. He was always with them. (p. 343)

Marian and Oberon have come face to face with a transcendent realm of meaning that resides in Robert Severin's strange life and motives. The pale, lonely rebel's political activism unwittingly brought two people together in a strange, obsessed "marriage" of blood. Perhaps Oates is suggesting that the future may be transformed by figures like Robert Severin, or at least by their belief in a kind of America different from the country that waged war on Vietnam.

This story then deals quite explicitly with a definite time and place; the characters are all firmly rooted in a contemporary historical framework. There is an emphatic connection between the historical dimension and the personal, as we have seen in the novels, making the individual's search for a viable self one with the country's. The reawakening of Marian Vernon's consciousness in this 1972 story anticipates Elena Howe's similar experience in the 1973 novel, and in both cases the catalyst is a lone revolutionary.

Another story of consciousness awakened through love is "The Lady with the Pet Dog"—a variation on the marriage betrayal theme that is the central focus of the volume. Here Oates does not insist on the specific historical framework we saw as so integral in the previous story. The setting is contemporary, but there is no mention of social
or political events and no explicit connection between the characters in
the story and the larger world outside of their immediate surroundings.
The plot is quite simple and straightforward: a woman leaves her loveless marriage to be alone for a few days in her aging family home on the Nantucket beach and here she meets the man who becomes her lover. What makes this story depart from the familiar fictional treatment of an adulterous love affair is the emphasis on the consciousness of the lovers involved and on the transcendent dimension their adulterous love represents. The central tension in the story is between the uninvolved passivity of Anna's relation to her husband and the intensely vulnerable awareness she feels when she is with her lover. Oates uses telling images of sleep and nullity to describe Anna's unfeeling relationship with her husband: "It was a kind of sleep, this love-making. She felt herself falling asleep, her body falling from her" (p. 392). When she returns to her husband, Anna feels herself a shadow-woman acting the part of dutiful, loving wife, sensing her incompleteness and emptiness: "There was no boundary to her in this house, no precise limit. She could flow out like her own blood and come to no end" (p. 345).

In contrast to the emotional vacuum she experiences with her husband, Anna's first sight of her lover is stimulating, intense, and alive. Even before they become lovers, Anna is puzzled to feel "how her soul strained to fly outward, to meet with another person" (p. 400). This image of the soul's flying out to another recalls Teilhard de Chardin's reference to "the multiplicity of the world's fragments driven toward one another through love." Anna's decision to entwine her life

\[8\] Teilhard de Chardin, as quoted by Oates in "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," *Southern Humanities Review*, 7 (1973), 236.
with this stranger's is, then, her unconscious attempt to unify the
disparate, chaotic elements of her life into some meaningful whole. An
image later in the story also repeats the mystical overtones Oates
gives to the illicit affair. Lying in bed with her lover, Anna "ima­
gined their posture like this, the two of them one figure, one sub­
stance; and outside this room and this bed there was a universe of dis­
jointed, separate things, blank things, that had nothing to do with
them" (p. 408). The hermetic sealing off of the lovers from the out­
side world points to her view of certain types of love experiences as
transcendent. The love affair often becomes prototypical of that com­
munal need we all have—the need that drives us toward someone or some­
ting to combat our isolation. Oates' imagery quite explicitly raises
pure physical contact to a metaphysical realm. As she states in another
story from the volume: "This plunging into another's soul, this pres­
sure of bodies together, so brutally intimate, was the closest one could
come to a sacred adventure" (pp. 474-5). Anna views her lover as a
"savior" who can give permanence to her life and provide a focus for
her unchanneled emotions; he likewise senses that, in some inexplicable
way, she "defines his soul" for him (p. 405). Anna and her lover share
the stage with Jules and Nadine in them, Jesse and Reva in Wonderland,
and Jack and Elena in Do With Me What You Will, each relationship ser­
viving as a metaphor for the wholeness and completion her characters seek—
a mystical union in a transcendent dimension.

Yet love is not a simple thing for Oates. Despite its healing,
unifying potential, love is frequently "murderous," as we have seen in
the novels, forcing one of the partners to contemplate killing the
other in an attempt to be free of him. The "pressure" between lovers
is both physical and psychological—a power that forces one to see his real, naked self in the eyes of his lover. This experience of self-recognition is often terrifying, as Anna discovers when she looks at her lover's drawing: "she stared at the drawing with a kind of lust, fearing of seeing an ugly soul in that woman's face, fearful of seeing the face suddenly through her lover's eyes" (p. 407). Thus the lover desires not only freedom from his partner but freedom from the harrowingly realistic vision of his inner self that the shared love experience has brought into the open. The only solution lies in that necessary illusion of freedom that Anna experiences at the end of the story—that transcendence of the limits of ego and acceptance of a dimension beyond the strictly real. Anna's revelation is a sudden recognition that she and her lover are "truly married" and that they share a destiny that transcends her own "self-pitying sorrow and her own life" (p. 410). The "selfless" energy flooding Anna's being at the close of the story is indicative of the momentary vision of a "new heaven, new earth" that underlies Oates' best fiction.

The visionary quality informing the troubled love affair of Marian and Oberon and the illicit relationship of Anna and her lover is also evident in "The Sacred Marriage"—the last of the three stories I have chosen from Marriages and Infidelities. Here the transcendent realm is art, as Oates explores the complex relationship between life and art, dramatizing through the story her theory of art's essentially communal nature. The novels do not deal explicitly with the realm of art, so this story is doubly important for its expression of the mystical possibilities of human intercourse, not just through love between man and woman but also through the artist's devotion to his craft. Oates, a
firm believer in the necessary relation between art and society, refutes the myth of the isolated artist; instead, she envisions a "cultural continuum of shared creative effort." She further espouses art's essential morality, seeing it as a "way we have of humanizing one another." Her beliefs pervade "The Sacred Marriage," and as Eileen Bender points out, the story is "a vision of communal art in the aftermath of the death of the individual ego."

Howard Dean, an aspiring young scholar, gains admittance to the home of the deceased poet Connell Pearce, and access to his papers, manuscripts and his widow. Seduced by the beautiful young woman, Dean enters an enchanted life of immersion in the Pearce manuscripts and infatuation with Emilia Pearce. He gradually becomes Connell Pearce—copying his handwriting, sleeping in his bed, and sharing his wife. The crushing blow comes when Emilia Pearce admits another aspiring writer to her home and to the papers, thus continuing the ritual which the dying Pearce envisioned in one of his works:

Yes, X is about to die and wants to write the novel of his own life, extended beyond his life. In Madrid he selects a certain woman. He is a noble, dying man, she is a very beautiful young woman. She is worthy of being his wife. And therefore he marries her and she nurses him through his last illness, and blesses all the admirers of his art who come to her, as she alone retains X's divinity. Her body. Her consecration. A multitude of lovers come to

9 Eileen Bender, "Autonomy and Influence: Joyce Carol Oates' Marriages and Infidelities," Soundings, 58 (1975), 393.

10 Oates, as quoted by Bender, p. 392.

11 Bender, pp. 402-3.
Art, then, becomes life as the parable reaches out beyond Pearce's death to control the lives of his followers.

Pearce, the egoistic artist, thus perpetuates himself through the various admirers of his art, selecting his wife to serve as medium. Emilia and Howard have a "sacred marriage," as he believes that their union becomes a real-life extension of Connell Pearce's art--a means for Pearce to achieve immortality. Dean feels the sacred obligation he has to make Connell Pearce's work known to the world, and this faith helps assuage his apparent betrayal by Emilia. Leaving the Pearce home to return to his "ordinary" job, Dean temporarily experiences a sense of loss and depression, but finally transcends the limits of his own ego and hurt feelings by realizing the sacred duty Pearce has entrusted to him:

. . . whatever had happened to Howard was not very real. . . . It was not important . . . . He was going to bring Connell Pearce to the world's attention: that was his mission, the shape of his life. (p. 36)

Pearce has indeed shaped Howard's life, as Oates skillfully delineates throughout the story. Writing a letter introducing himself to Emilia Pearce, Howard admits that Pearce has "partly created" him (p. 11). Earlier in the story Oates describes Dean as "absolutely free, uncommitted, still awaiting, at the age of thirty-seven, the event that might change his life and give it value" (p. 8). Thus the stage is set for the complete transformation Dean undergoes while living in the
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Pearce home. Living out the truth of Pearce's statement, "We are not doomed to private fates," Howard realizes that his artistic and personal fates are mystically bound up with the dead poet's. Pearce lives through Dean—he "creates" Dean's personality and his art gives shape to Dean's previously formless life.

"The Sacred Marriage" explores the complex relationship between life and art and presents Oates' vision of the cultural continuum she feels necessary for the best artistic endeavors. Just as Oates the artist sees herself as a part of a vast creative chain and her fiction the "creation of thousands of processes of consciousness," so Howard Dean, the artist-critic, comes to view himself not as the isolated artist but as an integral part of the creative process begun by Pearce in his work. The transcendence of individual ego and the ability to immerse oneself in a larger communal effort—be it politics, love, or art—is thus a hallmark of Oates' fiction. Such ego-transcendence represents the secular salvation her characters seek, but this solution is not wholly satisfactory, as one critic points out. Reading "The Sacred Marriage" as a "parable of the dangerous and seductive autonomy of art," Eileen Bender poses the question of how Oates' characters, "after dropping the ego's last defenses," come to "resist the terror of formlessness and the alternative threat of extrinsic manipulation." The answer of course lies in that visionary realm of "new heaven, new earth" that lies behind the best of Oates' fiction. In the world as we know it, it is simply not possible to completely lose oneself and break

12 Joyce Carol Oates, as quoted by Bender, p. 393.
13 Bender, p. 404.
that ineluctable pull of the flesh against the spirit. Perhaps in the new world of heightened consciousness Oates envisions, we will have such a transformation.

The Goddess and Other Women, the second volume of short stories I consider, appeared in 1974, two years after Marriages and Infidelities. As the title suggests, the women in these stories run the gamut from teenage prostitutes to wealthy society matron. Bruce Allen in Library Journal points out that the stories concentrate on "three basic worlds: scruffy small towns; the dark labyrinth of marriage; and the acid academic jungle."14 I have chosen a story from each world to illustrate the scope of Oates' work and to show her ability to dramatize the dilemmas and penetrate the consciousness of women from such seemingly disparate backgrounds: a mother from a comfortable middle class family; a daughter from a poor farming community; and a wife from the wealthy, privileged class.

A dramatization of the dangers of egocentrism and, in Eileen Bender's words, "the seductive autonomy of art,"15 "Magna Mater" is the story of Nora Drexler, prominent scholar-critic, and her son Dennis, a precocious, emotionally disturbed child. Nora is an isolated elitist who really enjoys demolishing with "puritanical zeal" the work of other scholar-critics.16 Always conscious of her intellectual superiority and of her son's, dreading the company of ordinary children and of her

15 Bender, p. 404.
boring, ordinary colleagues, Nora builds a fantasy world for herself and Dennis, a fantasy world very much like the lovely walled garden she takes so much pride in. Nora's egocentrism and uncharitableness manifest themselves in her relationship to the three men in her life—her father, her husband, and her son. An understanding of Nora's relationship to these three men is crucial to the story, for with each she must play a different role, evading the true Nora whose real self exists only in the dimension of her writing, her art.

Nora's father, a philosophy professor at Harvard for forty years; her ex-husband, a specialist in psycho-linguistic sociology; and her moody, brilliant son are all jealous of Nora's professional achievement. Nora recalls with disappointment her father's failure to read her most recent book, her ex-husband's resentment of the fame Nora had won in the Cambridge-Boston-New York area, and her son's possessive, whining, derogatory remarks about his mother's other life. Nora's study of the "poetic vision of old age" (p. 188) begins shortly after her divorce and just before her aging father is stricken with headaches, loss of vision, and a "slow numbing hideous disfigurement" (p. 188). Her father's literal inability to recognize Nora becomes an ironic extension of the benign and jealous neglect he has given her throughout his life. Nora's husband leaves her for a much younger woman who will pose no threat to his own professional development. Bereft of father and husband, Nora still senses their presence in her life: "But he seemed somehow with her, as her father seemed often with her, invisible in this handsome, cluttered office . . . the two of them listening, forced to be impressed, nodding in agreement . . ." (p. 194). Even her
twelve-year-old son is jealous of his mother's career, wanting her all to himself, accusing her of wanting to kill him.

Paradoxically, the very world of which her father, husband and son are so resentful is the only one where Nora can "move into another dimension entirely . . . a consciousness entirely freed of a body, of all temporal limitations" (p. 204). The thesis of her published five-hundred-page dissertation--"the vision of the poet as transcendent"--is an expression of Nora's belief in the power of art to rise above the mundane and trivial and become its own self-sufficient world. Nora's artistic rage for order, which she shares with her favorite poets, Yeats and Stevens, expresses itself, too, in the lovely walled garden lying in back of her Cambridge townhouse. In it she has artistic, carefully planned arrangements of shrubs, flowers, and herbs--a private, isolated space where she can "stake the claims of a particularity of being in a gross universe" (p. 189). The garden offers an element of security and order to Nora's disjointed fragmented life, a refuge like her writing from those aspects of life she cannot control.

Despite the seductive pull of her professional career and her other artistic endeavors, Nora senses that these are not enough--that, as she intuits, "none of this will save us" (p. 186). She has intermittent glimpses of the incomplete, walled-in life she and Dennis are living, but she refuses to accept the fact that the fault is hers. The climactic scene in the story involves an intrusion into Nora's private garden and thus into her life--since one is a metaphor for the other. One of her colleagues with whom she feels a kinship because of his brilliance, drops in for a drink, with his wife, and as he gets more and more intoxicated he begins hurling insults at Nora, accusing her of being his
spiral "twins"—harboring the same sadistic, cynical, elitist feelings that he does. Nora's rage for truth and her desire for order and rationality in the universe receive a crushing blow as she listens to herself being accurately summed up by an admired colleague. Mason Colebrook brings the truth that Nora is always saying she craves, yet she cannot accept it. The shock of recognition—as abrupt and unexpected as it is—has only a temporary upsetting effect on Nora. At the end of the story, after her guests leave, Nora embraces her son, wanting to protect him from the reality of people like Mason Colebrook—not realizing that she cannot forever separate herself and Dennis from the world outside the comfortable, orderly garden. Dennis and Nora join together in their expressed hatred for everyone but themselves: "I don't like living people" (p. 209), Dennis asserts; and neither recognizes the one-dimensional egocentric world they have created—a world as artificial and unnatural as the geometric plan of Nora's garden.

Nora Drexler's enormous ego precludes her being a good daughter, wife, or mother, for her total and selfish absorption in her art has cut her off from any normal emotional contact with others. Like Marvin Howe in Do With Me What You Will, Nora lives only vicariously—through the poems she is so expert at analyzing, or the articles she uses to undermine other critics. She substitutes the artificial, imposed order of art for the real disorder and chaos in her emotional life, failing to see the reality around her and the fact of her own devouring personality. While Oates recognizes the lure of the artistic world, since she herself is a part of it—she also warns against substituting fantasy for reality or art for life. Realizing the validity of art's transcendent dimension, she nonetheless espouses a more holistic view of life,
recognizing with Chardin that man must go a step further—that art, love, or politics can often be a barrier to true self-transcendence, for we must live in the real world, too.

"The Daughter" is the story of the mysterious relationship between a mother and daughter who are different in almost every respect, and of the love they share for the daughter's stepfather. Anna, the mother, and Thalia, the daughter, make a literal and metaphorical trip home to the country where Anna announces her intentions of divorcing Thalia's stepfather and remarrying for the third time. During their stay in the beautiful dairy country of Anna's birth, Thalia is initiated into what Oates calls the "mystery of love and relationships so abruptly lost, discarded . . . ") (p. 60). The central focus of the story is the contrast between Anna and Thalia—a contrast that leads inevitably to Thalia's seeming betrayal by her mother and stepfather at the end of the story.

Anna (another version of Loretta in them) was married and pregnant at age fifteen, never really having a chance to be a child. From the outset her wisdom in the ways of the world, her coarse pragmatism, and casual attitude toward the love affairs she drifts into are contrasted with Thalia's seriousness, naivete, and adolescent need for a father, for something stable in the constantly shifting panorama that is her mother's life. Unlike her mother, Thalia is destined, like the stepfather Jake with whom she feels a kinship, to watch "the relentless gravitation of those [she] loyed away from [her]" (p. 61). Even their attitudes toward the lovely countryside they pass through on the bus are totally different: Anna, the mother, takes little notice of what is outside, leaning back sleepily in her seat, thinking of nothing,
while Thalia's "rather large eyes" (p. 53) take in everything, as she looks forward anxiously to seeing her stepfather again. To Anna, the "slabs of the past" she sees outside her window are "powerless and inconsequential" (p. 52), while the whole meaning of Thalia's life is somehow bound up with the silent, brooding figure of her stepfather and the house and land that she had once known.

Midway through the story Oates interjects a statement that foreshadows escape to her stepfather's house: "In the silence that followed they thought of that: of weakness, of the ignobility of being weak, delicate, vulnerable to betrayal, loving rather than everlastingly beloved." Thalia reaches out to her stepfather, the only person she has ever loved, only to be betrayed by her stepfather's weakness and love for Anna. While Thalia waits outside in the car, Anna senses the rivalry between herself and her daughter who is no longer a child, and seduces Jake in an attempt to sever the bonds between Thalia and her stepfather. The very weakness and vulnerability in Jake that had made Thalia feel so close to him ironically serves, at the end of the story, to drive them apart. As Anna and Jake make love, the figure of Jake becomes hazy and indistinct to her, merging into the bodies of all the men she has so indiscriminately loved:

She was confused, enchanted, and by his look she saw suddenly that everything was safe; she could not tell whether she lived in this house or had only come for some reason or was married to someone else. . . . (p. 70)

The physical act of love between Jake and Anna takes on multiple significance for Thalia as she realizes, while waiting hopelessly for her stepfather, that he will never come. As Thalia looks at the red,
claw-like marks on her mother's neck, they become to her a "mysterious beautiful wound" (p. 71). The word "wound" is significant here, for it suggests the pain and sorrow love often inflicts—especially on the innocent, like Thalia. Its beauty arises from the ability to give love that is so very rare—a quality that Thalia and Jake share. The wound also becomes emblematic of the fact that Thalia has been both saved and betrayed by her mother's attempt to take her place. Love then becomes the transcendent dimension in this story—a dimension that often enslaves the innocent like Jake and Thalia but lets the Annas go free.

The final story to be discussed in this chapter, "The Goddess," gives its name to the 1974 volume of stories and is a fitting way to end a discussion of Joyce Carol Oates' short fiction, as it deals with a major Oates' theme: the ability of the individual consciousness to transcend life's painful realities and to create the necessary illusion of freedom. The "goddess" is a woman named Claudia, married to a wealthy man, living a privileged but boring life. The story builds to a climactic scene in which Claudia has a sudden vision of what she calls her "invisibility"—a knowledge that no one, not even her husband Alfred, can see her real self, can know the depths of her personality and her irrational, violent urges to perform destructive acts. Like the succession of identical Hilton Hotel rooms in which she and Alfred stay on their business trips, Claudia's life has been sealed off from the real world, insulated first by her father's and now her husband's money. The hermetic life she and Alfred have lived receives a stunning blow when someone steals Alfred's briefcase from their room, an event that is the catalyst for the rest of the incidents in the story.

Claudia and Alfred have led a sheltered and orderly life, learning
to make the correct replies to each other, never really being comfortable together. Alfred's insensitive, selfish, arrogant manner stems from his very evident opinion of himself as above the "riff-raff" because of his money. His manner toward Claudia in public places is "forced and embarrassed" (p. 415)—playing the role of dutiful, attentive husband to Claudia's part of loving wife. Their lives have been a charade—full of expensive hotel rooms, elegant restaurants, and deferential treatment—until Alfred's briefcase, full of tax records and receipts, is stolen, ostensibly by a Negro porter. With his money gone, Alfred looks tired, gray, exhausted and ordinary, as though his very soul has been taken from him. The theft is only one of the unsettling, disturbing events that occur in the story to shake their smug complacency: the hotel room they requested is full of cheap, plastic furniture; the area around the hotel is now full of hippies and derelicts, and their favorite restaurant is no longer the elegant, upper-class establishment it had once been. What becomes obvious to the reader is that the world has changed, but Claudia and Alfred have not; they still cherish their belief that wealth and status can protect them from the unpleasantness around them and buy them special treatment.

Midway through the story Claudia, left alone in the hotel room while Alfred reports the theft to the police, ventures out of the safety of their hotel room, lured by her curiosity about the milling crowds of prostitutes, junkies, and bums around the hotel. It is as though she has suddenly realized there is a world outside the one she has always lived in—a world that does not care how much money she and Alfred have. Claudia's bitterness at their victimization by a thief is really a bitterness against the injustice of any wrongs perpetrated against the
wealthy, "responsible and faithful" people like she and Alfred. Wanting to lash out at this injustice, Claudia takes out her tube of lipstick to smear the hotel wallpaper, but hesitates at the last minute. Later she lies in bed beside her husband hoping the hotel burns down, but realizes that only the innocent would suffer. These irrational violent acts which Claudia contemplates represent her feeble attempts to assert herself when out of her husband's shadow; they are foreshadowings of the ultimate revelation that occurs at the end of the story.

Standing at her hotel window watching the dawn, Claudia experiences an irrational, unexpected flood of happiness—a certainty that she is safe from the prying eyes of her husband and of the world, for no one really knows the real Claudia:

She was entirely innocent, entirely safe—if she had prowled the corridors of the Sherwood Plaza and defaced the walls, if she had wrecked the plumbing in one of the restrooms ... No one knew her at all ... she was really invisible. (p. 424)

Forced to play the role of Alfred's cultured, urbane wife, Claudia nevertheless harbors a secret life or "self"—one that enables her to satisfy her curiosity about the world she doesn't know and retreat into the contemplation of cleansing, irrational acts of violence. Being able to live a double life is Claudia's salvation, for the role she must play externally would otherwise be stifling. Perhaps this is a tenuous kind of security, having to live a lie, but often in the Oates canon it is the only security one has. The power of the individual consciousness to lift oneself above the banal and trivial and boring—in other words, the power of the mind to create its own world—often represents the self's only hope.
Chapter V

An Overview:
The Thematic Dimension of Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction

Since the appearance of her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), Joyce Carol Oates has met with mixed critical estimate of her work. Without exception scholars have admitted to the power and magnetism of her fictional world, and most have praised her ability to create characters who, in Alfred Kazin's words, "touch us and frighten us like disembodied souls calling to us from another world."¹ Most adverse criticism attacks the sheer number of Oates' works and her disturbing tendency to write what Peter Prescott labels "fictional journalism."²

Driven by an obsessive need to depict the violence and brutality of life in the twentieth century, Oates brings to the center of her artistic vision chillingly graphic scenes of rapes, murders, beatings—all the facts of life in contemporary American society. Her subject matter would seem appropriate for naturalistic treatment and, indeed, scholars like Benjamin DeMott chastise Oates for the seeming absence of any "reflective authorial intelligence" in her work.³ But Walter Clemons, who in 1972 called Oates "perhaps the most significant novelist to have emerged in the United States in the last decade," understands the writ-

ter's apparently random succession of violent events as an expression of her attempt to "bring order to the violent extremity and complexity of American life without mitigating that extremity." 4

The inevitable problem of how to bring order out of chaos Oates shares with the best of twentieth-century American writers who, in Philip Roth's words, are "trying to understand, and then describe and then make credible, much of the American reality." 5 Admitting to the blood and violence that have become her characteristic subject matter, Oates nevertheless sees her choice of material as a means to a greater end: "It seems that I write about things that are violent and extreme, but it is always against a background of something deep and imperishable. I feel I can wade in blood . . . because there is this absolutely imperishable reality behind it." 6 Both her unabashed treatment of sordid naturalistic details in her works and her failure to "comment" authorially on the events in her novels stem from Oates' definition of art, the "imperishable reality" giving meaning to the blood and gore.

In a 1972 essay Oates asserts that "there can be no violence out of a sense of nothing, for violence is always an affirmation. . . . Art is built around violence, around death; at its base is fear." 7 Unlike DeMott, Calvin Bedient sees the absence of an authorial presence in Oates' work, particularly in them, as a source of power: "Neither

5 See Clemons, p. 72.
6 See Clemons, p. 72.
7 "Introduction," The Edge of Impossibility (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett-Crest, 1972), p. 11.
stylist, architect, judge, or philosopher, she is simply and astonishingly them." The consummate ability to project herself so totally into the lives and experiences of her characters forms the crux of the seemingly artless art Oates wishes to create; hers is, in other words, an art that conceals art. As Bedient states later in the same essay:

"Oates has no time for 'crossword paraphernalia' of sophisticated modern fiction. them reduces literature to virtually the dramatic level alone." Much of the drama that pervades her work results from Oates' view of violence as a means to a higher end. Usually violence serves as a liberating force, as when Jules murders the policeman in them or Jesse buys a gun and contemplates murdering his daughter's lover in Wonderland. Hence, the mere imaginative act of contemplating violence achieves a cathartic purpose, for it enables the character involved to break out of his debilitating spiritual inertia and to function effectively in the real world.

The depiction of pure experience—no matter how vicious or banal—lends to Oates' best work a sense of immediacy and serves to externalize the author's and the characters' fantasies. What separates Oates from fictional journalists like Dos Passos is her concern not with strictly external reality but with what she calls "extreme states of mind." In words that recall T. S. Eliot's formula for the objective correlative in poetry, Oates delineates exactly what it is she tries to do in her

8 "Vivid and Dazzling," Nation, December 1, 1969, p. 610.
9 Bedient, p. 610.
fiction:

I would like to create the psychological and emotional equivalent of an experience, so completely and in such exhaustive detail, that anyone who reads it sympathetically will have experienced that event in his mind (which is where we live anyway).¹¹

This aesthetic purpose lends emotional power to such social and historical phenomena as the Detroit riots of the 1960s (for we see them filtered through the uneasy consciousness of Jules) or the assassination of President Kennedy (seen through the shocked, disbelieving eyes of Jesse and the terrified eyes of his daughter, Shelley). History in Oates' work often becomes internalized, repeating a pattern which Lewis P. Simpson has noted in the best of American fiction from Hawthorne to Faulkner;¹² the violent, chaotic round of events becomes not an end in itself but a means—a vehicle for conveying the fragmentation of the modern consciousness because it is witness to the trauma of history. Violence in an Oates work is thus a prelude—a thrust into a future—confusing, disjointed, but a future nonetheless. Violent acts or the contemplation of violent acts often serve as necessary preliminaries to a character's imminent psychological awakening, as in Jules's murder of the policeman in _them_ or Elena's frenzied sexual climax near the end of _Do With Me What You Will_. Oates' characters are, in Alfred Kazin's words, "caught up in the convulsion of society and they cannot see the

¹¹ "Transformations of Self," p. 53.

meaning to their lives that history will impose." Anyone who has read the details of wrenching poverty in which the Wendalls live, or the account of the suicidal love affair between Jules and Nadine, or the gripping first section of *Wonderland* in which Jesse runs from his murderous father, can testify to Oates' ability to make us see and feel the aberrant and mysterious realities underlying the mere historical facts.

Oates' attempts to render experience palpable arise from her quasi-mystical definition of art which stresses dream-like qualities: "All art... springs from the dreaming mind." If, as she asserts, "Art is the effort of the Ego to communicate with a deeper self," then it becomes the artist's task to summon from within us our repressed and deep-rooted feelings and responses and make us imaginatively participate in the experience of the novel. To do this, the artist must obliterate herself—her personality—and become the people she is creating: she must do away with the subject/object antithesis and, in romantic terms, become the object—as Keats yearned to be the nightingale or Shelley the skylark. In her preface to *them*, the author discusses the process involved in this particular novel's creation. Discussing her acquaintance with the real Maureen and her knowledge of Maureen's history, Oates writes:

... so much material had the effect of temporarily blocking out my own reality, my personal life... Their lives pressed upon mine eerily, so that I began to dream about them in-

13 Kazin, p. 78.
stead of about myself, dreaming and redreaming their lives.16

Such an ability to blot out her own consciousness and record the various mental states of her characters has been viewed as both strength and weakness by the critics and reviewers of Joyce Carol Oates' fiction. Kazin thinks that her books are haunting rather than successful because "the mind behind them is primarily concerned with a kind of Darwinian struggle for existence between minds, with the truth of the universal human struggle."17 But it is this very Darwinian struggle for existence that Oates thinks is her destined subject matter. In a 1972 essay entitled "New Heaven and Earth," Oates discusses her role as artist in the modern world: "I still feel my own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my time, and (hopefully) to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future."18 The word "dramatize" makes the difference here. Naturalistic writers like Dreiser, Norris and Crane factually depict the Darwinian struggle between men, but Oates' forte is being able to shift the emphasis from a mere recital of exterior, naturalistic details to interior truth about the external events. Thus, in Wonderland we are concerned not with the bare historical fact of a Presidential assassination but with the impact such an event has on the consciousness of Jesse, Shelley, and indeed the American people. The absence of authorial interpretation of such events

17 Kazin, p. 82.
18 Saturday Review, November 4, 1972, p. 53.
becomes, in my opinion, a strength—an invitation to the reader to wit-
ness cataclysmic events as they register on the psyches of Oates' char-
acters. Granted, her novels demand an active participation and as-
simulation by the reader; but once he has given these, the novels do
indeed come to life, not merely as a catalogue of the adventures of a
Depression family in 1965 Detroit (them) or the experiences of an alien-
ated, orphaned doctor (Wonderland), but as the paradigms of the failed
American experiment filtered through the consciousness of Oates' char-
acters.

In a revealing statement in New Heaven, New Earth (1974), Oates
counters those critics who condemn her for wallowing in blood and capi-
talizing on the violence in our lives:

It is my belief that the serious artist insists
upon the sanctity of the world—even the despair-
ing artist insists upon the power of his art to
somehow transform what is given. It may be his
role . . . is to articulate the very worst, to
force up into consciousness the most perverse
and terrifying possibilities of the epoch, so
that they can be dealt with and not simply feared;
such artists are often denounced as vicious and
disgusting when in fact they are . . . attempting
to locate images adequate to the unshaped, uncon-
scious horrors they sense.19

This desire to locate adequate images—to express the convulsions of
history that twentieth-century men have lived through—results in the
typical Oates style of "going into a character's head and creating a
kind of poetic prose, using images rather than regular syntactical

14-15.
Oates' statements of artistic purpose suggest that while her subject matter may be naturalistic—replete with roach-infested shanties, murderous lovers, and drunken fathers—her manner of approaching these themes is not. The actions and details of an Oates novel gain importance only as they register on the consciousness of various involved individuals: Maureen's beating by her drunken stepfather gives way to a surrealistic sequence where the catatonic Maureen lies in bed, almost dead, while events and people are viewed through her shocked, half-awake mind; the story of the runaway Shelley and her lover Noel in Wonderland is related through a series of confessional letters Shelley writes home to her father, thus charting the physical and spiritual disintegration of Jesse's daughter without resorting to strictly objective third-person narrative. The voice that Oates gives to the nightmares of her time is thus uniquely her own, shaped by her intense belief that "art must be directly connected with culture, with society."^{21}

Novels like them, Wonderland, Do With Me What You Will give expression to various periods in twentieth-century America, notably the Depression and the decade of the 1960s, when the individual is indeed overwhelmed by historical facts and events—living through them but not understanding them. As such, these particular novels perform an important task because they dramatize and give artistic shape to events which were in themselves misunderstood and chaotic. Oates does not see

^{20} "Transformations of Self," p. 54.

herself as a conscious interpreter of history, but as a creator of char­acters who share our horror and revulsion at the uncontrollable in our lives and through whose consciousness we can reevaluate and relive vicar­iously what we were once too shocked to understand.

Oates' concern with the primacy of mind or individual consciousness in her works leads to a corresponding interest in the process of individuation, or the shaping of a self in the world—a concern which links her to the mainstream of American literature. The term "self" has been used and abused in literary criticism, and is of course a multi-faceted concept like "hero" or "romanticism" which assumes new dimensions in each age and perhaps should not and cannot be fixed permanently. But the root meaning in the OED, as quoted by Lionel Trilling, is "that . . . in a person which is really and intrinsically he (in contradistinction to what is adventitious)." 22 Oates, too, would define the self as the essential nature of a person. Her characters are constantly referring to the "real me," a "better" or "other" self that is waiting to emerge. They vacillate between ultimate faith and a chilling certainty that they can never escape the biological, social, and historical forces that helped to mold them. A recurring element in Oates' works is the loss of or absence of a father, perhaps emphasizing modern man's alien­ation from his personal past and the intensely lonely aspect of each man's search for self-realization. Her women often fall in love with father-figures and her men, like Jesse in Wonderland, are often obses­sed with the idea of what it means to be a "father." Oates seems al­

ternately to espouse either the fluidity of the self or its inflexible, fixed nature—a complex question that she tries to dramatize artistically in the works I have chosen for extended analysis.

The difficulty—and perhaps impossibility—of defining a stable self is one of her chief concerns, and she sees this difficulty as arising from the chaos of historical forces that often overwhelms us and changes the nature of the world in which we live. If, as Robert Penn Warren states, the self can only be defined with relation to the community\textsuperscript{23}—that complex of historical forces that emerges as "society"—then Oates' works reflect this, for she never loses sight of the various social and historical events that form the background of her characters. They do not float in some amorphous "any-time" as the characters of some of her contemporaries do (Barth and Heller, for example). Instead she is careful to place them exactly in time (June, 1966; May, 1930) as if wanting us to see them not in isolation but as products of their own age and of its nightmares. Her characters either have faith that the world cannot see their true self (for if it could, they would not be living in such misery or unhappiness) or, like Jesse in Wonderland, they are afraid of their true self—the monster within that reveals itself intermittently—so they assume a variety of fictive selves. Hoping to obliterate what is their irreducible core of being, Oates' characters often engage in love relationships in an attempt to locate outside themselves something of value. Each succeeding novel after them explores more fully the process of individuation, its difficulty,

and the driving necessity we all feel to pursue the riddle of self in our lives.

The presence of numerous mirrors and mirror scenes in Oates' novels lends added support and clarification to her themes of self-definition. Trilling points out that with the rise of the individual and his sense of unique worth as a person came a corresponding rise in literary mirror scenes and an interest in seeing one's own reflection. Oates often writes parallel mirror scenes at the beginning and end of her works, as in them when Loretta's breathless anticipation and wonder on seeing her image is exactly balanced by the later scene of her daughter Mau­rean's probing self-appraising look into the mirror. Here the con­trasting scenes hold out the possibility of a cyclical pattern of de­feat and despair for the Wendall family, but elsewhere in the novel mirror reflections offer hope, as when Jules catches sight of himself in a plate glass window and senses the infinite possibilities the future holds for him. One of the climactic mirror scenes in Wonderland is Jesse's chilling self-mutilation. As he stares into the steamy bath­room mirror, Jesse imagines that he can see "the living surface of his soul," and this frightening glimpse leads to his frenzied razor cuts. It is as though the sight of his own blood flowing so freely is exhilar­ating—a physical certainty that is a welcome antidote to the spiritual confusion of his life. Elena Howe in Do With Me What You Will often catches sight of her lovely expressionless "public" face and realizes that this is not her true self but only an identity society has imposed

24 Sincerity and Authenticity, p. 25.
on her. In each of these instances the mirror reminds the character of another hidden self that is not evident to the world; thus, the scenes are effective structurally and thematically for they are artistically rendered moments of character revelation.

The irony implicit in any discussion of the self seems to be the inescapable doubt that there is a constant self to be found. Warren contends that the self is not found, but created, and if this is true, then the heroes of twentieth-century fiction are engaged in an ostensibly fruitless quest. But perhaps the cyclical nature of our lives and of history affords us a continued chance of renewal, as Jules, Jesse, Elena Howe, and the various heroines of The Goddess and Other Women hope. The mere fact of the fluidity of the self does not necessarily spell despair and defeat. The self can continue its re-definition, and as Oates expresses in Do With Me What You Will, can even transcend its intense self-preoccupation through a love relationship with another individual.

The search for identity in America has always been inextricably bound up with the concept of the nation itself, and the individual's sense of himself reflects his relation to the cultural and historical forces that shape him. Oates believes in the necessary congruence of the individual and history which Trilling discusses in Sincerity and Authenticity: "... the American self can be taken to be a microcosm of American society, which has notably lacked the solidity and intractability of English society." Trilling's statement throws light on Oates' belief that art must be directly related to culture and so-

26 Democracy and Poetry, p. 89.
27 Trilling, p. 113.
ciety, for if the individual must define and place himself in a historical context (and there can be no self without a past), then the artist responsive to the needs of his time must likewise explore not the self in isolation but as it is reflected and shaped by the exigencies of his age. Mark Twain's Huck Finn sets out on his mythical voyage to get away from one "sivilized" image of himself and proceeds to move toward a truer and more humane self-concept with respect to his fellow man. His personal search is set in motion by the absence of a real family to guide him, but the search ends in Huck's affirming his place in the larger human family based not on rights but duties. Gatsby's "Platonic conception of himself" is somewhat tarnished by the realities of America in the 1920s, but he remains true to his fictive self and to the quest for the Daisy of his dreams. Gatsby's singleminded dedication to an ideal, however unrealistic, is the premise upon which America was conceived. His "romantic readiness" and "infinite capacity for hope" were our country's too, and his restless searching links him to Oates' Jules Wendall, who also cherishes an imagined self and believes in the possibility of achieving it even against tremendous odds. Jules vacillates between belief in an unlimited future and an intuitive knowledge that there can be no better self just around the corner.

The dilemma Oates tries to dramatize is how to create or sustain a stable self in a fluctuating environment. In a world that no longer pays even lip service to the "verities and truths of the human heart," it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a holistic sense of ourselves with relation to that world; Oates' works explore the fragmented nature of our lives and her belief that, as Alfred Kazin puts
it, "American life is taking some of us by the throat." If them and Wonderland seem oppressive in their circular patterns of defeat, Do With Me What You Will represents a shift away from such an ostensibly bleak world picture and shows in Oates' words her desire to "move toward a more articulate moral position, not just dramatizing nightmarish problems but trying to show possible ways of transcending them." Elena Howe moves toward an affirmation of the value and power of romantic love and thus ultimately finds a way of transcending the self that has imprisoned her against her will. Marriages and Infidelities, a 1972 book of short stories, also shows a way out of the craziness of American life through meaningful relationships with other human beings. Oates affirms in these last two works the necessity of defining the self not through stoicism and isolation but through interaction with others—what Warren speaks of in Democracy and Poetry as the vital and necessary relationship between the self and the community. In articulating and affirming the power of the individual to transcend the limitations of the ego, Oates becomes linked with such writers as Faulkner who, as Warren points out, "dramatizes over and over the necessary relation of the self to the community . . . to a society which . . . embodies a sense of vital relations among individuals, an ethos." Joe Christmas in Light in August becomes a type of the isolated modern hero locked in the prison

28 Kazin, p. 82.
29 See Clemons, p. 73.
30 Warren, p. 25.
31 Warren, p. 28.
of self, forced to bear the weight of consciousness that Jack Burden in
All the King's Men does. Christmas does not find a way out, but Jack
does by shouldering the weight of the past, coming to terms with it, and
moving forward toward a more rational humanistic sense of his own worth
vis-a-vis the community.

Those who say that Oates writes the same story again and again thus
fail to take into account the very definite progression in her works
toward a transcendent view of human experience. She admits that "With
Wonderland I cam to the end of a phase of my life though I didn't know
it."32 Despite her wading in blood, Oates finally seems to move beyond
the purely physical details which are only a vehicle for expressing
her underlying optimism about the human race. She says of her work:
"Blake, Whitman, Lawrence, and others have had a vision of a transfor-
mation of the human spirit. I agree with it strongly myself. I see
it coming. . . . I want to do what little I can to bring it nearer."33
Even a relatively early novel like them has rays of hope, since Maureen,
Loretta, and Jules all believe, despite evidence to the contrary, that
life is getting better for them—that their true self needs only a magic
word to make itself appear. Oates' concern is above all with the power
of the mind to transcend the vulgar and the banal and to treasure illus-
sions about itself—illusions that are necessary for life to go on.

Among her contemporaries, Oates occupies a unique position. Not
a member of the Eastern establishment core of writers, she is often

32 Clemons, p. 73.
33 Clemons, p. 74.
dismissed by them. In the words of a current feminist, as quoted by Clemons, "She's not our sort."\textsuperscript{34} She is very difficult to categorize, which may explain why critics of the contemporary novel always refer to her in the Introductions to their books as a major talent or an important new voice, but never discuss her at any length in their books.\textsuperscript{35} Unlike Mailer, Barth, Barthelme, and other modern writers, Oates has resisted the extremely individualistic idiosyncratic treatment of the novel and has blithely gone her own way writing fairly traditional novels with clearly delineated plots. As Clemons points out:

Writers of the '60's--John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Thomas McGuane and John Gardner--have resorted to parodistic reinventions of the novel, to Borgesian miniaturization, to freeze-dried black comedy as replacements for the realistic narrative that no longer seems feasible to them.\textsuperscript{36}

But Oates has remained true to her conception of the novel as an attempt to order experience rather than to mirror existing chaos or to create a new fictional chaos. Her concern with the power of the individual psyche, its reactions to the world around it, and its often heroically futile attempts to transcend the inertia of environment links her to the

\textsuperscript{34} Clemons, p. 72.

\textsuperscript{35} Tony Tanner's discussion of style in American literature, \textit{City of Words} (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), mentions Joyce Carol Oates in the introduction, with regrets that he did not have the space to consider her at any length. Raymond Olderman's \textit{Beyond the Wasteland: A Discussion of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties} (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972) also fails to include a discussion of Joyce Carol Oates.

\textsuperscript{36} Clemons, p. 74.
great enduring moderns like Proust, Joyce, and Mann who also tried to express the "spirit of a society at a crucial point in its history."Granted, Oates may never write a Magic Mountain or a Ulysses, but she is like the creators of the masterworks in what she calls her "laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book."38

It remains to be seen what Joyce Carol Oates will become. She never loses sight of the historical background against which her characters suffer, love, and die. them, Wonderland, Do With Me What You Will, Marriages and Infidelities and The Goddess and Other Women express important truths about America at various crisis points in its history. As Oates says, "I think I have a vulnerability to a vibrating field of other people's experiences. I have lived through the '60's in the United States, I was aware of hatreds and powerful feelings all around me."40 And yet her works are not what we call historical novels. The emphasis, as I have pointed out, is on the individual's struggle for selfhood and finally in the later works of this period his capacity to transcend the confines of self through love relationships. There is a progression in Oates—from the relative bleakness and inconclusiveness of them or Wonderland to the tentatively affirmative stance of

37 Clemons, p. 74.
38 Clemons, p. 72.
39 Since the appearance of the latest book I discuss, The Goddess and Other Women (1974), Oates has written another novel, The Assassins (1975), a novel of political assassination in America, several volumes of short stories including Crossing the Border (1976), The Hungry Ghosts (1976), and numerous review articles—but so far nothing to match the power of early novels, them and Wonderland.
40 Clemons, p. 73.
Marriages and Infidelities or Do With Me What You Will. Oates' later works recognize the limitations of the self and the romantic desire in man to locate something meaningful or permanent outside of his own consciousness. Her essentially dramatic conception of the novel is linked to her desire to portray the drama of the individual attempting to define, locate, and eventually to move beyond the isolation of ego and somehow recognize the necessity of defining himself in terms of a larger community. Thus, Oates' definition of art becomes an expression of her subject matter, too—"a more conscious, formal expression of a human communal need."  


---------. "Vivid and Dazzling." Nation, December 1, 1969, pp. 609-611.


Hayes, Brian P. Rev. of Wonderland, by Joyce Carol Oates. Saturday Review, October 9, 1971, p. 38.


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---------. The Edge of Impossibility. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett-Crest, 1972.


Vita

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Approved:

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