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**The Autonomous Narratives  
of Joyce Carol Oates:  
Dissociation and the  
Mapping of the Mind**

**by**

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Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Ph.D. degree in English literature

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# Contents

## **Preface:**

*Dissociation and Jung's Complex Theory in Oates's Works*

iii

## **Chapter One**

*You Must Remember This: Splits in Consciousness after Trauma*

1

## **Chapter Two**

*Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart: Alcoholism  
and The Dissociated Self*

49

## **Chapter Three**

- Part I** *I Lock My Door Upon Myself: Wrongful Elisions  
of Sex, Birth and Death* 97
- Part II** *The Rise of Life on Earth: A Portrait of Clinical  
Dissociation* 126
- Part III** *Black Water: The Articulate Twin, A Uterine Fantasy* 150

## **Chapter Four**

*Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang: A Portrait of Power and Rage*  
170

## **Chapter Five**

*Zombie: The Nadir of the Dissociation Continuum*  
208

## **Conclusion**

243

## **Bibliography**

261

## Abstract

Seven recent works by Joyce Carol Oates, published between 1987 and 1995, represent the author's concentrated attempt to map the human mind. In these seven texts, Oates explores the "Multiple personalities [that] inhabit us all." The frequently warring voices in Oates's texts reflect her interest in Carl Jung's idea of multiple complexes, or "multiple centres of consciousness," and the activity of dissociating that forms these centres when an event threatens to overwhelm the ego. Oates's work affirms Jung's idea of a continuum of dissociation by including the gamut of personalities - from relatively healthy, dissociative subjects to the pathologically dissociated, brought by Oates to an intense emotional pitch. Her texts lay bare what Glass calls the "layering phenomenon" by which the mind copes with trauma, abuse, violence or any life situation that overwhelms the defenses of a character.

My thesis considers the following texts: *You Must Remember This* (1987), *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart* (1990), *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1990), *The Rise of Life On Earth* (1991), *Black Water* (1992), *Foxfire* (1993), and *Zombie* (1995). The dramatic stimulus of six of these texts springs from a traumatic event: witnessing or committing a murder, physical or sexual abuse, a dissociated condition resulting from childhood neglect, or simply the failure of the psyche to integrate in maturation. The seventh text, *Zombie*, explores the mind of a psychopath whose mental condition exceeds the boundaries of the dissociative, fragmented or depersonalized psyche. The chilling chronicle demonstrates the complete severance of the heart from the head and offers no causal factor to explain its existence. All of the texts examined here reflect an artist refusing to flinch in the presence of material which, in Oates's words, can often be described as "the contradictory, the obscene, the vulgar, the unbearable." According to Sjoberg, Oates "continually bears witness ... to ...the humiliation of any form of persecution." According to Parini, Oates's inclusion of the "violent and unattractive" in these texts reflects her view that the writer should "act as the conscience of his race". In its inclusive approach, Oates's recent oeuvre demonstrates her refusal to ignore social and economic conditions in the United States in the twentieth century. By confronting the dark side of humanity in all its manifestations - deviant sexuality, extreme narcissism, psychosis or misuse of power - Oates, according to Winslow, renders all these things human, and worthy of the artist's attention and the public's serious consideration.

Oates has been interested, throughout her career, in "the recording of various states of mind, some of them extreme." Although her 1976 novel, *Childwold*, explores multiple voice, it is not until the late 1980s that Oates's treatment of multiple voice becomes a sustained study of dissociative states. In Oates's recent work, these complexes, which the author calls "storm[s] of emotion," are integral to the dynamic of her texts. Like the phenomenon of multiple personality, her texts form what Hacking calls a "microcosm of thinking"- an area that can be fruitfully studied in relation to Jung's complex theory. Jung views complexes as clusters of associations that have feelings attached to them.

These complexes function as separate personalities, and are always a defense against the certain pain that would result if the ego were to try to integrate these feelings. In his essay, "A Review of the Complex Theory," Jung defines the complex... as an "image of a certain psychic situation..., incompatible with the habitual attitude of consciousness. This image has a powerful inner coherence ... its own wholeness and ... relatively high degree of autonomy." Jung sees the formation of dissociated complexes as a normal, continual and "universal process" of the psyche. When there is trauma involved, however, Jung views each dissociated complex as having the capacity to replace the ego by becoming a fully autonomous personality. This dissociated complex, in the most extreme case, presents itself clinically as Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. All of Oates's fiction discussed in this thesis has characters who exhibit dissociative traits. What is singular about the author's use of dissociation in all these texts is the function these dissociative complexes perform in moving her plots forward. Oates establishes the complexes through her use of multiple voices and then initiates a series of emotional triggers that bring one complex into play. Enid Stevick's suicide attempt at the start of *You Must Remember This*, for example, is an actualization of the dissociated part of Enid's psyche that was created when Uncle Felix sexually assaulted her. In *The Rise of Life On Earth*, Kathleen Hennessy, by virtue of the dissociative state that was triggered by her father's beatings and her mother's abandonment, is able to bypass reason. Moving directly from feeling to action without the intercession of reason is a pattern Oates plays out frequently in her recent texts. Because Oates replays the mind as she believes it works, principal characters proceed associatively, linking memory with present events to form emotional associations, which, in turn, trigger the characters' actions in the texts. Oates uses different voices within the same character to track the dissociative fragments that make up her protagonists' personalities. By using voices to create dissociative complexes, or mini-personalities, Oates is also able to sustain a high emotional engagement in her fiction and with her readers.

## **Preface: Dissociation and Jung's Complex Theory in Oates's Works**

*"[E]vil is advertised the better to impede and ostracize it." (Barthes, "Striptease")*

The novels and noveilas Joyce Carol Oates published between 1987 and 1995 demonstrate her intense interest in mapping the human mind. Her sustained concentration on how the brain functions in the presence of trauma, psychological wounding and dysfunctional family conditions began with the publication of *You Must Remember This* and continued, with the exception of *American Appetites*, through the publication of *Zombie* in 1995. This thesis will consider five novels: *You Must Remember This* (1987), *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* (1990), *Black Water* (1992), *Foxfire* (1993), and *Zombie* (1995). It will also examine two novellas: *The Rise of Life On Earth* (1991) and *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1990). *What I Lived For* (1994) will be excluded here as its prodigious length precludes the minute examination necessary to show the dynamics of dissociation at work in the text. The complex of emotions around powerlessness, rage and grief, formed when Corky Corcoran witnesses his father's murder when he is a young boy, has the same pattern of triggers, fragmentation of

the personality, and dissociative behaviour present in many of the other texts. Another novel Oates published during this period, *American Appetites* (1989), will be excluded from this study for different reasons. The main character of *American Appetites*, Ian McCullough, falls within the benign spectrum of dissociation on Jung's continuum. McCullough's dissociation is the result of his failure to acknowledge and integrate his emotional needs with his intellectual ambitions and achievement. His failure to balance these needs results in criminal charges being laid against him for his wife's murder. Oates's focus in the text is less on the intricate workings of McCullough's mind than it is on the questions of status and morality in the upper-middle-class professional community in which he lives.

My study of Oates's fiction from 1987 to 1995 will focus on dissociation and fragmentation in characters who experience trauma. This time period coincides with Oates's return to psychological realism in her works. The publication of *Marya: A Life* in 1986 "represented a major artistic turning point, one that is reflected in most of her fiction of the late 1980s, and beyond," according to Oates's biographer, Greg Johnson (332). Critic Elaine Showalter called her creation of the female character Marya "Oates's most personal statement about a female literary tradition, as well as the novel which represents her most compelling heroine."<sup>1</sup> *Marya: A Life* is not included in my discussion of autonomous voices

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<sup>1</sup>Showalter made this comment in an article she wrote for *Ms. Magazine* in 1986, entitled "My Friend, Joyce Carol Oates: An Intimate Portrait." The article was reprinted in Milazzo's *Conversations With Joyce Carol Oates*, 133.

even though the central character, Marya Knauer, suffers sexual abuse and learns, in Showalter's words, "to close off her body, to become 'not-there' and to deny her own desires for intimacy and touch" (Milazzo 133). The fragmented voice that I am examining and the dynamics of triggering complex reactions to move the text is not as concentrated in *Marya: A Life* as it is in her subsequent texts. The novel is, however, part of Oates's return to the terrain of her childhood and her exploration of the impact of emotional wounding, deprivation and abandonment. *Marya: A Life* was written after Oates had completed "a series of postmodernist Gothic novels that represented the most ambitious single undertaking of her career" (Johnson 303). The five works, written between 1980 and 1984, span the eight decades<sup>2</sup> between the 1850s and the 1930s. They may well have been inspired by the critical success of *Bellefleur* in 1980. According to Johnson, indulging in the "lush, romantic playfulness of Gothic conventions" (305) gave Oates respite from the "critical resistance to the violence in her realistic fiction" (309) and an emotional reprieve from writing violent scenes.<sup>3</sup> After Oates finished *Angel of Light*, published in 1981, Johnson relates that she wrote a letter to Gail Godwin in which she "promised herself that 'I would write something with a

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<sup>2</sup>Johnson quotes Oates's remarks on the impetus for the series of five texts she produced during this time. The comment was made in the Afterward to *The Mysteries of Winterthurn*, entitled "Why 'genre,' one might ask?"

<sup>3</sup>In her 1995 article for *The New Yorker*, entitled "Delirium and Detachment: The secret of being a writer," Oates reveals the impact of the vitriolic attacks she suffered because of her subject matter even early on in her career. "My bouts of discouragement, dread. Bewilderment. What is the *point* of a life's work when it can bring upon the writer such obloquy...cruelty. The average, private individual will never open a journal or a book to read vicious things said against him, nor will he come across seemingly 'objective' judgements that would sweep away everything he has attempted" (136).

happy ending next, if I survived” (305). But none of the next three books, *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, *The Crosswicks Horror*, and the *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, was embraced by critics or the general public. The final text in this quintet, entitled *My Heart Laid Bare*, was completed on June 30, 1984, but not published until 1998, twelve years after Oates’s return to realism and the fictional landscape of her childhood in upstate New York.<sup>4</sup>

After finishing *Marya*, Oates wrote a series of texts that form an in-depth exploration of the impact of fragmented voices within a personality. The texts minutely trace the way unintegrated shards of a character’s personality can assume dominance and control, whether or not the character in question is normal, neurotic or psychotic. The texts, published from the late eighties through the mid-nineties, demonstrate Oates’s interest in the interplay of emotionally based associations with rational thought. These interactions are played out through her exploration of multiple voices in the mind. Oates goes to great lengths to make the reader aware that the voices heard in her fiction should be considered fragments of the whole personality and not its entirety. Oates uses italics, capitalized words, spatial gaps, even drawings, to indicate voice change. The visual differences are like speed bumps in the texts. They prevent readers from assuming that the characters she creates are fully integrated personalities. Sometimes the differences

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<sup>4</sup> I am assuming that the publication of *My Heart Laid Bare* was delayed because of the poor reception the three works after *Bellefleur* received. The novel followed the publication of the acclaimed *We Were the Mulvaney*s in 1996, and *Man Crazy* in 1997. In tone and subject matter, the text belongs with the other four books written together in the mid-eighties.

are more subtle and the reader must follow carefully the thread of various personality fragments as she weaves them throughout the fabric of her work. On still other occasions, sudden shifts in plot indicate that a single fragment of a character's personality has assumed temporary dominance. Oates's interest in multiple voices within the personality is not a superficial ploy but a reflection of her fascination with what makes human beings act. In "Jekyll/Hyde," a review article of a book on Robert Louis Stevenson's (1886) novella, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that she published in 1988, Oates summarizes the literary tradition of opposite personalities co-existing within a single person. Characters such as Dr. Jekyll, a physician who dissociates himself from his "baser instincts" (604) in the form of Mr. Hyde, have, according to Oates, "always existed in the collective imagination" (603); they "abound in folklore and oral tradition" (607). Oates cites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1893), Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1839), and Charles Dickens's unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) as other examples that "the ego contains multitudes: multiple personalities inhabit us all" (604). Oates traces the literary lineage of double personalities only a year after the publication of *You Must Remember This*. It is not the first time, however, that she demonstrated her interest in multiple voice. In an interview published in the *Ohio Review* in 1973, Oates says that her "own writing is very obviously the recording of various states of mind, some of them extreme" (53). She points to *Love and Its Derangements* as an example of a short work that "represents two

different selves, two warring selves, but within one book, as if they went together” (57). Brenda Daly opens her 1996 book, *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, with Oates’s 1974 reference to “the many selves, the contending voices” of the *author’s self* in her novels (Daly ix).

Oates’s review essay entitled “Legendary Jung” appeared in 1983 in *The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews*. The text reveals her familiarity with and respect for Carl Jung.<sup>5</sup>

[T]here is, of course, the remarkable Jung, the incomparable Jung of the more than twenty volumes of *Collected Works*, certainly one of the most brilliant and disturbing thinkers of all time” (160).

Oates clearly admires the fact that Jung, in his own life, “did not resist visions, voices, obsessions, or fantasies of a frequently terrifying nature” (162). What Oates attributes to Jung in the essay is mirrored in her construction of fragmented voice in her texts. The voices in Oates’s works during the period 1987-1995 also reflect Jung’s idea of a continuum of dissociation. Jung’s theory of dissociability of the psyche is clearly present in these texts. Jung understood dissociation as an

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<sup>5</sup>In Lief Sjöberg’s interview with Oates, published in 1992, in *Contemporary Literature*, this question was posed to and answered by Oates:

“Q. It seems obvious especially in your later works that Jung is of importance to you. What books of his have you read and what have you got out of them?

A. I am a voracious reader, and Jung is one of the innumerable writers and thinkers I have read. Since I cannot accept his theories on the “male” and “female” archetypes I am not a “Jungian” - but I find his exploration of the Unconscious extremely intriguing....Jung understands the wellsprings of life - creativity above all - reside in the Unconscious and its functions....In Jung one confronts a bold, original, and “poetic” imagination, valuable for the questions it raises as much as for the answers it hopes to provide” (281-282).

essentially benign continuum, but one that could accommodate all human beings whether their personalities were healthy, neurotic or pathological in nature. What Jung called “autonomous groups of associations,” in the *Tavistock Lectures* (81), Oates refers to as “autonomous narratives” in *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart* (184).<sup>6</sup> Jung defines a complex as:

a conglomeration of psychic contents characterized by a peculiar or perhaps painful feeling-tone, something that is usually hidden from sight. It is as though a projectile struck through the thick layer of the persona into the dark layer (83).

Jung’s complexes function as “nodal points” (Noll 357) in the personality’s structure.<sup>7</sup> Oates recreates these points as triggers that expose the intricate workings of characters’ minds. Her texts also reflect a clear understanding of the clinical descriptions of dissociation, fragmentation and multiple personality so prevalent in the discourses of medicine, social psychology, and literature today. Jung’s discussion of “dynamics and relationship” in the *Tavistock Lectures*, (69) and the description of voice and personality change in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* can be employed usefully in analysing Oates’s work during the period under examination. A critic could not claim that Oates’s conscious intention

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<sup>6</sup>From this point on in the introduction, the novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* will be referred to by the shortened title *Because It Is Bitter*.

<sup>7</sup>According to LaPlanche and Pontalis, Freud was uncomfortable about how the word “complex” was used. The authors comment on and quote from Freud’s “On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement”:

“Although Freud acknowledged the worth of the association experiments he very soon expressed misgivings about the use of the word ‘complex.’ He writes that “it is a convenient and often indispensable term for summing up a psychological state descriptively. None of the other terms coined by psycho-analysis for its own needs has achieved such widespread popularity or been so mis-applied to the detriment of the construction of clearer concepts” (73).

was to create fictionally Jung's idea of complexes and dissociation or to trace the clinical presentation of dissociative identity disorder in her characters. Enough of Oates's fictional trajectory, however, coincides with Jung's theory of complexes and the parameters of the dissociative process as set out by the American Psychiatric Association under the heading "Dissociative Identity Disorder," to justify the endeavour. These ideational maps help the critic move through Oates's difficult fictional terrain to formulate a context in which her genius can be understood and appreciated.

Trauma and dissociative disorders became a prominent medical subject in the last two decades of the twentieth century. By 1980, *The Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders* included a new category of disorders relating to dissociation. The topic had been discussed for a century, however, by pioneers in the field - Janet, Freud, Breuer, Prince and Jung.<sup>8</sup> Janet introduced the idea in his *L'Automatisme Psychologique* in 1889. A comprehensive article published in 1989 by R. Noll, "Multiple Personality, Dissociation, and C.G. Jung's Complex Theory," stated that Janet viewed dissociation as a mental disorder and defined it to mean "associative systems of ideas that have been split off from consciousness and exist in a parallel life along with the dominant stream of consciousness" (354). According to Ian Hacking, author of *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and*

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<sup>8</sup>Stephen S. Marmer, in an article entitled "Psychoanalysis of Multiple Personality," notes that "[a]t the turn of the century, Morton Prince ... writing in the tradition of Janet, published extensively on the subject of multiple personality and dissociation"(439).

*the Sciences Of Memory*, Janet's use of the French words "dissociation" and "desegregation" indicates that he had formed a theory and model of "multiplicity, and its dynamics" (44), but that he dropped both the word and the idea after he wrote *L'Automatisme Psychologique*, having become convinced that the condition was more similar to what is now known as manic depression (44). Hacking's position, therefore, is that Janet is wrongly acknowledged as "the great founder of the theory of dissociation" (44). Hacking credits William James with bringing the word "dissociation" into English in 1890, and Morton Prince, the "great American pioneer of multiple personality" with bringing the word to America (44). Jung's idea of autonomous complexes<sup>9</sup> was influenced by his studying under Janet for one semester in 1902-1903 (355), but unlike his teacher, Jung did not view complexes as evidence of pathology. Noll quotes from Jung, Vol. 22 on this point.

Although this peculiarity is most clearly observable in psychopathology, fundamentally it is a normal phenomenon...The tendency to split means that parts of the psyche detach themselves from consciousness to such an extent that they not only appear foreign but lead an *autonomous life* of their own. It need not be a question of hysterical multiple personality, or schizophrenic alterations of personality, but merely of so-called "complexes" that come entirely within the scope of the normal. (356).

In "On the Nature of the Psyche," (1947) Jung argued that the process of dissociation was "a *fundamental* psychological process" ( Noll 356). His view that dissociation is a healthy activity which, in Noll's words, "allows the expansion of the personality through greater differentiation of function" (356), offers great

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<sup>9</sup>What Jung named "autonomous complexes," Janet saw as "subconscious fixed ideas" (Noll 354) and Freud concluded were obsessive-compulsive activities used to protect the psyche (55).

scope to authors such as Oates who are interested in exploring the workings of the human mind without regard to pathology. Jung contributed scientific proof of complexes in his Ph.D dissertation, where he recorded research he conducted from 1904-1907 (Noll 357). Noll cites Jung's comments on autonomous complexes in Jung, volume 24:

The ego is only one of many autonomous complexes, each with an allotment of consciousness all its own, and which interact and often conflict with the ego for executive control of conscious processes and the body. In pathological conditions, such as multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia, their strength is greater and their dissociation from the ego more extreme, disabling the personality with a "multiplication of its centres of gravity" (357).

The words "splitting," "fragmentation" and "dissociation" will be used frequently in this discussion and therefore need clarification. In his 1975 article, "What Splits in Splitting?" Paul Pruyser examined the complications when using such words to describe precise psychoanalytic ideas, pointing out the problems that arise when terms used in a scientific endeavour are also in use in popular culture. To further confuse matters, Pruyser points out, these words can be used transitively or intransitively, in active or passive voices, as nouns, verbs or adjectives. According to Pruyser, Jung preferred the term "dissociation" to "splitting" because the latter carried an intensity of meaning - cleavage, breakage - which did not fit into his view of all but the most extreme form of dissociation in schizophrenia (Pruyser 29). For Jung, it was not a matter of someone splitting something so much as:

the autonomous units simply push[ing] their way through conscious experience, finding little or no resistance on their intrusive path because

their subject's personality integration was weak to begin with (Pruyser 29). Jung views the split-off or dissociated elements as possessing their own energy (Pruyser 30). The units that split off or dissociate are what Jung calls complexes.

Early studies of the idea of splitting in the personality centred on the theory of hysteria and the change in consciousness that such emotional storms entailed. Pruyser records a number of words used to describe hysteria in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century: "twilight states, dreamy states, absences, double conscience, somnambulism, fugue states, and duplication or multiplication of personality" (4). Charcot, Freud, Breuer and Janet, while recognizing the change in thinking and personality in patients with hysteria, all differed in their interpretation. Charcot's ideas were based on a theory of "constitutional inferiority" (5). Janet added the "dissociation (of the idea from consciousness) and amnesia (inability to recollect the incident afterward)" (5), although his overall view of the mind was based on the idea of "psychical synthesis" (4). Freud used the words "splitting" (Spaltung) and "dissociation" interchangeably in "Sketches for the 'Preliminary Communication' of 1893" (6). In 1893, Freud and Breuer co-wrote "Studies on Hysteria." In this text, the authors agree with Janet that a "splitting of consciousness" occurs in "rudimentary degree in every hysteria" (6). Based on the above discussion of the way in which pioneers in the field used these words, I intend to use the words "split," "splitting," "dissociation," and "dissociating" as interchangeable in this exploration. My intention is to show the presence of these

original ideas on dissociating and splitting in the voices of Oates's characters in selected works from her 1987-1995 publications. Something also needs to be said about my use of the words "fragment" and "fragmenting." "Fragment," when used as a noun simply means an unintegrated piece of the personality . A fragment is a mini-personality, containing clusters of emotional affects or feelings which have been constellated together by a traumatic event. Fragments are distinct because they are not integrated into the normal operating personality of the subject. A fragment holds conscious but emotionally unintegrated feelings and information; a dissociated fragment, on the other hand is a mini-personality that operates without the conscious knowledge of the individual. As a verb, "fragment" means that one piece of the personality breaks off, splits off, or dissociates from the whole. Fragmentation refers to the process of fragmenting, splitting or dissociating. Oates always gives cues when this process is about to begin. Kathleen Hennessy, in *The Rise of Life On Earth*, gets the sensation of ants crawling over her body; Iris Courtney experiences the buzzing of many channels being turned on simultaneously in *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*; QP in *Zombie* switches to his brutal Todd Cuttler persona; Enid Stevick in *You Must Remember This* becomes Angel-face.

Given the psychopathology in many of Oates's texts, the current psychoanalytical definition of splitting also applies to many of her works. According to Moore and Fine's *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, published in 1990, splitting is now viewed in a variety of ways, from "the normative unfolding

of mental life” (183) to a defense mechanism that becomes a “more advanced process” such as repression. Splitting then occurs only under conditions of adaptive stress or psychopathology (184). Moore and Fine’s text emphasizes that splitting only assumes dominance in a personality when normal development is interrupted or reversed (184). The word “dissociation” has far more complexity in its current usage. Dissociative identity disorders, as defined by *The Diagnostic And Statistical Manual* now encompass a whole panoply of disturbances, from depersonalization and derealization to multiple personality disorder. According to the *DSM*, a true dissociative event involves loss of memory. Multiple personality disorder involves both loss of memory and the replacement of the person’s identity with another identity unknown to the conscious self. With depersonalization

[o]ne’s perception of oneself splits into a detached, observing self and a participating or experiencing self together with the feeling of estrangement or unreality about the latter (52).

Derealization is defined as:

an experience involving a feeling that the external world is unreal and strange...It usually occurs in association with depersonalization - both phenomena ward off anxiety by a denying fantasy, namely, that the situation is unreal (55).

*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or *DSM* has been describing and refining its symptomatic explanation of dissociative identity disorder (called Multiple Personality Disorder until 1994), for over two decades. According to Ian Hacking, the *DSM*’s third edition, published in 1980, had only three criteria:

A. The existence within the individual of two or more distinct personalities,

- each of which is dominant at a particular time.
- B. The personality that is dominant at any particular time determines the individual's behaviour.
- C. Each individual's personality is complex and integrated with its own unique behaviour pattern and social relationships (10).

The 1994 *DSM* substantially expanded the definition of a personality state to include an "enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to and thinking about the environment and self" (19). It also included lapses in memory that were "too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness," and it removed personality disturbances due to alcohol or medical conditions (19). The 1994 deletion of alcohol-induced behaviours from an official definition of dissociative behaviour removes many of Oates's characters from being identified as dissociative in strictly psychiatric terms. Alcohol is the drug of choice and the primary mood-altering, personality-changing mechanism in her works. In the first text considered here, *You Must Remember This*, Enid's sexual involvement with her uncle, Felix Stevick, always involves her being plied with alcohol first. In *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*, Persia's mental unravelling and personality changes are due to alcohol; Minnie Fairchild's final dissolution occurs through alcoholism. Alcohol and infatuation cloud Kelly Kelleher's mind in *Black Water* when she decides to drive to the ferry with the inebriated Senator. In so doing she trades a night of sex in a hotel room for a watery tomb. Kathleen Hennessy's abuse stems from the violent beatings she receives when her father is drunk. Later in life, her sexual submission to men always involves alcohol. Quentin's psychopathic actions in *Zombie* start with his discontinuing his medication. He then uses a combination

of drugs and alcohol to bring himself to the point of acting on his obsessive desire to possess someone who will comply unquestioningly to his every sexual command. As the aim of this thesis is not to diagnose a condition, but to show how the ideas of dissociation work harmoniously with Oates's work during this period, I am going to use the 1993 version of the *DSM*, which did not specifically omit changes brought on by alcohol. For purposes of my argument, I would like to view obsessive alcohol use as one way people achieve a mind-body dissociation. The violence that occurs to people who are "dissociated" in this way is horrendous. It is clear from Oates's insistence on this point that she views alcohol abuse as a dangerous alteration of the personality. In the texts being considered here, the abuse of alcohol is always a trigger for the unresolved complexes to surface, often with deadly results.

While the *DSM* criteria were written to describe multiple personality, the ideas of "distinct personalities," "dominant personalities" and "unique behaviour patterns" mentioned in the 1980 *DSM* have a wide application to Oates's characters, their peculiar voices, and their behaviour in her novels. Only one of the characters in this study, Kathleen Hennessy in *The Rise of Life On Earth*, could be defined as a multiple, yet many of the other characters - Enid and Felix in *You Must Remember This*, Iris, Persia and Jinx in *Because It Is Bitter*, Calla in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, Legs Sadovsky in *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* - exhibit aspects of dissociative identity disorder. The list of symptoms in the *DSM* does not limit their characters, but it helps to explain the preponderance of voice

and behaviour change in the texts. Dr. Frank Putnam, one of the most articulate medical researchers in this area, published a paper in a 1993 edition of the journal *Dissociation* in which he outlined the clinical presentation of this condition (81-85). Many of the dissociative symptoms he records surface repeatedly in Oates's characters. Some of her characters have "amnesias and memory disturbances...trance-like phenomena...internal voices" which may criticize or soothe the person (82). Characters such as Iris Courtney in *Because It Is Bitter* experience depersonalization, a concept that Putnam defines as "intense feelings of estrangement from self, often a non-being of self" (83). Other characters, such as Kelly Kelleher in *Black Water*, or Iris Courtney, as she is being sexually assaulted in *Because It Is Bitter*, have "out-of-body experiences" (83). People likely to dissociate, such as Enid Stevick in *You Must Remember This*, sometimes make suicide attempts. The "switching symptoms...accompanied by observable shifts in the patient's behavior, thought processes, speech, affect, and mannerisms" (83) are very clearly drawn by Oates in *Zombie* when Q\_P\_ switches<sup>10</sup> personalities and his

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<sup>10</sup>According to Putnam in *Dissociation 1:1 1998*, there is a

"[s]witch process in multiple personality disorder and other state change disorders. Switches can be triggered by a wide range of stimuli; depressive trains of thought (Seligman 1975; Beck 1976), anniversary reactions (Hilgard & Newman 1969), social situations or expectations may lead to state changes. Self-induced volitional state changes probably occur in most individuals....Sensory stimuli are powerful triggers of state change, particularly for evoking dissociative or anxiety states" (28).

The process of switching involves changes in *affects*. This term, according to Moore and Fine, editors of *Psychoanalytic Terms & Concepts*, is frequently used as a synonym for feelings and emotions. The authors point out that the word *affects* currently refers to three levels of conceptualization:

- (1) clinical manifestations such as the reported feeling state, especially in relation to the

alter, the violent Todd Cuttler, emerges.

Trauma, or psychic wounding, plays an important role in the unfolding of Oates's texts. Whether it is moral failure, the collapse of idealism, physical or sexual assault, murder, or the compulsion to repeat horrific actions, Oates uses the emotional encapsulation that unconsciously results from different kinds of trauma to move her texts forward. She meticulously plots the long-term effects of trauma in the lives of her characters and shows the trickle-down effect of trauma into others' lives. Oates takes American nightmares and makes them emotionally true by recreating them in fiction. She does this with conscious moral intent. Barthes's statement in "Striptease," that "evil is advertised the better to impede and ostracize it," (84) precisely describes Oates's artistic self-determination. The combination of her painful subject matter, the barren terrain of her fictional landscape in upper New York State and the marginalized and deprived citizens who inhabit that fictional territory, make what she is saying exceptionally raw. Oates's determination to tell the truth about life puts her in a difficult position with her audience. It is uncomfortable to read about her characters' lives. Graphically presented trauma is not what middle America wants to think about; Oates's characters are not material for fantasy. Readers do not want to trade places with

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pleasure-unpleasure continuum; (2) neurobiological concomitants including hormonal, secretory, vegetative and/or somatic phenomena and (3) a metapsychological concept which has been related to psychic energy, instinctual drives and their discharge...The subjective feeling component of affects always has a pleasurable or unpleasurable quality (except for feelings involving detachment and isolation)...The physiological component of affect is mediated through both the autonomic nervous system (blushing, sweating, crying...rapid pulse are all possible physiological responses) and the voluntary nervous system (changes in posture, facial expressions, tone of voice) (9).

Oates's characters, nor do they wish to undergo the suffering she describes. As she told Jay Parini in a 1987 article for *The Boston Globe Magazine*,

a writer's job, ideally, is to act as the conscience of his race. People frequently misunderstand serious art because it is violent and unattractive. I wish the world were a prettier place, but I wouldn't be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me (Milazzo 155).

The subject matter Oates concerns herself with, the way she reaches through her readers' defenses to make them feel the enormity of one person's transgression upon another, separates her from most other authors. When the reader enters the mind of an Oatesian character, he or she feels complicity in the wrongdoing being perpetrated, guilt for even witnessing the events. Oates has the uncanny and rare ability to make equally powerful what Glass, in another context, distinguished as "[w]hat happens inside a text and what happens inside the self" (12). She does not merely demonstrate fragmentation; she brings readers into the minds of those who "suffer it" (Eagleton 191). Her intention is similar to the impetus for Glass's book *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality In A Postmodern World* - not simply to draw a picture of "emotional pluralism," but to show how a person lives "with a fragmented identity" (Glass 7). Her voice intelligently, firmly insists that we confront what *is occurring* in America. Oates discusses realities, such as incest or serial killing, that are the fodder of voyeuristic television shows or pulp newspapers. The difference is that she makes the reader *emotionally experience* what *the situations mean*.

Oates sometimes uses real events in the United States as a springboard for what she has to say. What she writes, however, is in no way "faction," a method of

writing where a real event is augmented with fictional details to produce the equivalent of literary fast food. The writer Michiko Kakutani in a review of *Black Water* for *The New York Times Book Review* in 1992 entitled "Taking the Plot From the News, Even Old News," accused Oates of doing just this. *Black Water* recalled the drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne, and the escape of Senator Ted Kennedy from a car that sank in the water off the island of Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts. In her novel, Oates used the two hours her character Kelly Kelleher is still alive in the submerged car to comment on the abuse of power and the idealization of politics in America. At the same time, Oates used the text on a deeper level to create a book-long uterine fantasy, a metaphor on the problematic birth of one articulate twin and the possible birth of another, as yet inarticulate, fetus. Oates is far too intricate and intelligent in her writing merely to elaborate on a known event.

For all Oates's discussion of trauma, however, she is clearly a writer who has immense, realistic hope. Her texts show characters experiencing the unspeakable, and enduring. As early as 1973, in an interview published in *The Ohio Review*, Oates stated:

My own writing is very obviously the recording of various states of mind, some of them extreme, and even a dark, depressing novel like *Wonderland* can be argued to possess a certain human value: it shows you how to survive. It shows you that someone managed to get through (53)

With the exception of the incurable psychopath Q\_P\_ in *Zombie*, her characters do survive, grow, and change. With the exception of *Zombie*, the books examined in this thesis all exhibit hope. Oates frequently shows her characters making their way

in the world despite the odds against them. Her characters experience trauma. They react, they dissociate or fragment, but they move through the experience to another place. The new place the characters reach is better but not perfect. There is no “perfect” in Oates’s world, no unremitting happiness, no Hollywood ending. There is progress. There is joy, but it is always expressed within the parameters of real life where happiness is not a condition to be achieved but an occurrence to be treasured. Happiness is never the goal of Oates’s texts. The ability to change is.

Oates’s message of hope frequently gets lost, however, because the horror of what she writes about overshadows the individual characters who are making their way through the emotional minefields. Frequently the graphic and sometimes horrific components of her work provoke angry and irrational responses from otherwise intelligent people. Oates’s work is often viewed as abhorrent. She is seen as condoning what happens to her characters or what they contemplate doing. There is a sense that she must be killed off metaphorically for bearing such bad news. Yet the traumas that befall her characters are everyday news stories in North America..

In *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, the authors LaPlanche and Pontalis point to three ideas contained in the Greek derivation of the word *trauma* that have been carried over into the lexicon of psycho-analysis: “the level of a violent shock, the idea of a wound and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organization” (466). These three ideas inform the medical and literary discussion of dissociation, fragmentation and splitting. The intensity of the shock to the

psyche determines whether or not the personality becomes fragmented, dissociated or permanently split. The person who has suffered the trauma becomes impaired by his wound. His psyche is not integrated in its operations but made lame by the presence of encapsulated pieces, or fragments, that hold sealed-off feelings and memories. The encapsulation poses a threat to the individual affected as well as to the people with whom he has relationships. In terms of the person who has suffered the trauma, there is always the danger that the encapsulated piece may move to the forefront of the personality when conditions exist that trigger the stored feelings and memories. When that happens, the individual performs actions that are out of character with his normal behaviour. In terms of Oates's texts during this period, the price of a personality remaining unintegrated after a trauma is very high. In *You Must Remember This*, Enid Stevick nearly succeeds in her suicide attempt; in *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*, Iris Courtney settles for a marriage that will bring her security but not love. Kathleen Hennessy, in *The Rise Of Life On Earth*, kills patients she is supposed to nurse while she is in a dissociative state. The dissociation of mind and body is the controlling structure for Oates's novel *Black Water*; the necessary dissociation of the artist from her world is the subject of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*; the dissociative activities of an enraged girl gang led by an idealized and mythic heroine is explored in *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*. In *Zombie*, the truncation of the psychotic mind is scrutinized. Here, feeling is only present as a trigger to murder and conscience is wholly absent. Trauma, as LaPlanche and Pontalis note, "affects the whole

organization” (466) of the psyche. Oates’s construction of these seven texts, as well as of *What I Lived For*, corresponds to the way in which dissociation, fragmentation and psychosis work in the mind. It is as if Oates took the information about how the traumatized brain operates and drew a fictional map exactly analogous to it. The energy in her books comes from the way the mind functions when it is wounded. The actions in the text spring organically from incidents when complexes formed by traumatic events are triggered. By examining the pattern of these events and the resultant dissociative traits in Oates’s characters, readers understand what Eileen T. Bender, in a 1980 article for *Studies in Short Fiction*, called “the transforming power of the human consciousness, able to accommodate the shocks of the world” (423).

# Chapter One

## *You Must Remember This: Splits in*

### *Consciousness after Trauma*

*"Splinter psyches" can develop into separate personalities, each with consciousness, memories and specific adaptive functions that promote the survival of the individual as a whole. (Noll)*

In *You Must Remember This*, published in 1987, Joyce Carol Oates puts the multi-faceted human mind under a microscope. She renames the "multiple centers of co-consciousness" (Noll 359) that she explores "autonomous narratives" (*Because It Is Bitter* 184) and claims, like Carl Jung, that whether we are mentally healthy, or suffer a pathological illness, multiple personalities "inhabit us all" (Oates, "Jekyll-Hyde," 604). Oates's thinking is firmly grounded in Jungian ideas. Jung refers to centres of consciousness that co-exist with a host personality as "splinter psyches" (Noll 356). For Jung, the phenomenon of dissociation lies at the centre of the mind's functioning. It is perfectly normal to have many warring voices in a single, healthy personality. Jung believes that fragmentation "allows expansion of the Personality through greater differentiation of function," according to R. Noll, who writes cogently about the connection between Jung's complex theory and dissociation (Noll 356). While Jung acknowledges that the continuum

of dissociation can include dissociation rooted in pathology, he does not stress the pathological, as his teacher Pierre Janet had in his work, *L'Automatisme Psychologique*, published in 1889; nor does he hold Freud's view that dissociation primarily "function[s] as a 'defence'" (Noll 355). There is, however, room in Jung's view for "autonomous complexes....[i]n pathological conditions...such as multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia... [where complexes are stronger]... and their dissociation from the ego more extreme" (Noll 357). In these cases, the dissociative phenomena spring from traumatic incidents or events. Oates converts Jung's idea of "autonomous complexes" into its fictional equivalent, which she names "autonomous narratives." The voices the reader hears in Oates's fiction between 1987 and 1995 explore Jung's ideas on dissociation and the fragmentation of consciousness.

When a personality fragment is formed under traumatic circumstances in Oates's texts, the resulting voice becomes autonomous. The degree of autonomy of the fragment depends on the extent to which the information held in that splinter would overwhelm the normal functioning of the "principal" voice of the person. In Jung's view, it is perfectly possible to have gradations of fragmentation in the psyche, ranging from barely perceptible fissures, to wider cracks, and fully autonomous divisions. The tendency to have split-off fragments within one personality means that parts of the psyche appear foreign but lead autonomous lives of their own (Noll 356). Each autonomous voice in Oates's texts revolves

around a complex, which Jung defines as an "image of a certain psychic situation which is strongly accentuated emotionally, and is, moreover, incompatible with the habitual attitude of consciousness." According to Jung, complexes have a "powerful inner coherence" (Jung, *Structure and Dynamics* 96) In the *Tavistock Lectures*, Jung remarks that the complex is a little personality.

It has a sort of body, a certain amount of its own physiology. It can upset the stomach. It upsets the breathing, it disturbs the heart - in short, it behaves like a partial personality. For instance, when you want to say or do something, and unfortunately a complex interferes with this intention, then you say or do something different from what you intended...exactly as if you had been interfered with by a human being or by circumstances from the outside (80).

Oates takes Jung's idea of complexes and renames them "storm[s] of emotion" (Bellamy 25). She uses these clusters of associations as the axes on which she builds her characters' dissociative or fragmented personalities. In *You Must Remember This*,<sup>11</sup> Oates examines several complexes and the resulting fragmentation, and sometimes splitting, which occurs in the characters: in Enid Stevick, there is a complex relating to sex and death; in Felix Stevick, a complex relating to the abuse of power; in Lyle Stevick, a complex relating to feelings of inferiority. The dynamic of the text springs from the workings of these complexes; the resolution in the text derives from the process of integrating these dissociative pieces or complexes into the principal personality.

At the end of *You Must Remember This*, no character is completely

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<sup>11</sup>Whenever Oates's novel *You Must Remember This* is quoted in the text of this chapter, only a page number will be in the parentheses following the quotations.

integrated, but the central characters have consciously dealt with their dissociated parts. Oates is writing at this time as a social realist, so the reader is left with implications, rather than certainties, about permanent personality integration at the end of her texts. What matters in Oates's works, however, is not the outcome so much as the examination of the mind *in media res*. It is the inner voices that create such a compelling psychological landscape in her work. Markers in the text are interior and shifting; images or emotional clusters of associations, move the characters to act. Events in the text act as triggers that bring various complexes into play as the drama unfolds. The "layering phenomenon" (Glass 50) of the voices of a single personality allows the reader an astonishing engagement with the personal and the social issues in the text. It is important to add the architectonics of dissociation to a critical discussion of Oates's work and to the already familiar concepts of conscious and unconscious dynamics in the personality. The fragmentation of voice, which the idea of dissociation highlights, brings the true complexity of the human personality to the forefront. *You Must Remember This* is a fine example of Oates's exploration of multiple voice.

The novel documents the titanic struggle between Enid Stevick's conscious, responsible self and her unconscious urges, which draw her to sexual merger with Uncle Felix, and simultaneously compel her to attempt to obliterate herself through suicide. Normal fears and sexual urges are present in Enid's personality before the defining sexual assault by Uncle Felix. The attack, however, creates a dissociated fragment in Enid's psyche. This splinter pulls her towards suicide only after Felix

assaults her at his dilapidated hotel, the Villa Rideau. The trauma blocks out Enid's normal responses so that Enid transposes emotions such as fear and hate into need and love, and actively pursues a sexual relationship with her uncle. If a reader views this fact in isolation from the rest of the text, it might appear that Enid is consciously and freely choosing to have sex with her uncle. Oates's placement of Enid's suicide attempt in the three-page prologue to the text, and the fact that the prologue is dated 1953, nine years earlier than Section One, refute this view. The time shift between the prologue and the first section, "The Green Island," indicates that Oates intends to give readers information on how Enid's suicide attempt came about. This placement, combined with the minute description of the actual attack later in the text, leave no doubt whatsoever that in Oates's view Enid is not operating as a normal, fully-integrated personality. Oates makes clear that Enid's victimization by her Uncle Felix lies at the core of her depersonalized state. By its language and bare clinical detail, the prologue shows a detached, emotionally frozen and violated young woman following procedures that will result in her death. Oates writes the prologue in the third person, and distinguishes Enid's words from her normal voice in the text by using italics. Her voice is hollow, her actions seemingly rehearsed and calculated. Her feelings are invisible. Oates comments that Enid has "no pity for the face in the mirror" (4). She is intent on maintaining control in executing the procedures of her own death. She methodically showers and washes her hair, dresses herself, bride-like, in a white nightgown, and carefully counts the aspirin as she swallows them. She does not

want to encounter resistance to her impulse to do "something quick and violent and irreparable" (127).

Enid's psychological desperation is the result of her sexual victimization by her Uncle Felix. In becoming Felix's victim, Enid accepts blame for what Felix has done to her; she colludes with him in covering up the assault. When the incident occurred, Felix demanded she remain silent about it. Now, as she prepares for death in the opening section of the text, she recalls with apparent satisfaction: "I didn't tell anybody" (5). The pact not to tell anyone about the assault makes Enid feel complicit in the evil perpetrated on her. In her own mind, Enid believes that she deserves to die. Because she has dirtied the family laundry, she sees herself as an odious person who must be eliminated - a pollutant such as one of those spewing from the Port Oriskany, New York factory near her home.

Oates presents Enid as having two faces: first is Enid Maria Stevick, a dutiful daughter, an excellent student, a highly sensitive and talented young girl; the reverse is Angel-face, a "sly, wriggly, hot-skinned, treacherous" and highly sexualized person (36). Angel-face is not, at the start, a fragmented part of Enid's personality, because Enid, in early adolescence, has not yet suffered the traumatic event that splits her psyche. Before the assault that fragments her, Enid is aware of Angel-face as the part of her personality that stores impulses she normally considers bad or unworthy. In the beginning, Angel-face is simply a nickname used for the sweet-faced Enid when she consciously steps out of her role as obedient daughter to seek thrills by shoplifting with her sister Lizzie's friends. Oates,

however, gives early indications that Angel-face will not remain simply a nickname the older girls have adopted for her but will become a fragment which gains ascendancy when Enid's ego cannot accommodate her actions. Oates's narrator takes great pains to point out that Enid finds it very easy to dissociate.<sup>12</sup> The narrator tells the reader that Angel-face quickly appears when Enid's interest ebbs and her "thoughts drift" (50) in church. As a child, when she is locked in an old icebox by Lizzie, she is able to dissociate, going "to a place where she hadn't needed to breathe" (136). When Felix stares at Enid with obvious sexual interest later in the text, and then asks her to go for a ride, "Angel-face prodded her, yes" (100), although the personality of Enid Marie would be too shy and careful to take that chance. In the first chapter of Section One, "The Green Island," the simple act of lying in bed and listening to music is the trigger for Enid's mind to "slip thinly ... into the wallpaper where there was no harm" (23). Enid is a child who needs to dissociate to feel safe. Oates shows the workings of young Enid's mind by association. Her method is strikingly reminiscent of the mentally handicapped Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Benjy makes connections between Maddy, her smell of pine needles and the feeling of safety. The world, as little Enid Stevick sees it, is a very dangerous place. She knows a little girl needs a place to hide from danger, so to protect her psyche, her mind moves from music to the

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<sup>12</sup>Enid fits the criteria of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual On Dissociative Disorders IV*, which states that patients with dissociative identity disorder must exhibit "ease of dissociating" (DSM IV 485). The text states that these patients "tend to be highly hypnotizable and especially vulnerable to suggestive influence" (DSM IV 485).

wallpaper in her bedroom, to paths in the Adirondacks in summer. Enid can also always hide in the music in her head. The music comes from the wallpaper that decorates her bedroom. The wallpaper has paths, safe paths such as those in the Adirondacks. Enid can let herself "go" into the wallpaper. To Enid, if a girl cannot "slip thinly" away, she might get caught under a door like the dead boy she saw pictured in *Life* magazine (10) when she was small. That boy could not get thin enough to squeeze under the door at the Buchenwald extermination camp and therefore died. So, little Enid reasons, she must learn to get thin enough to slip away or dissociate.

As Enid becomes older, she continues, whenever necessary, to escape into the wallpaper, reasoning that this will keep her safe from both interior and exterior dangers. During her childhood, there are many places outside home that are dangerous for Enid - the vacant lot where "the worst things happened to girls" (23) and a mourning dove is set on fire (12), the footbridge that shakes when a train goes over it, the undertow at Shoal Lake, even the threat of an atomic bomb attack. All the things Enid fears hold the possibility of death. Angel-face, however, is attracted to the "death scenarios" as strongly as Enid Maria is drawn to the safety of the wallpaper paths in her bedroom. Angel-face treats the death threat as a game. Only when she is completely without defenses is the game suspended (60). At these moments, Enid believes she is happy as she no longer has to struggle with the conflicting pulls - one outward towards life, the other inward towards death. When Enid performs such dangerous movements on the

trampoline that her gym teacher insists that she stop, when she swims to complete exhaustion in the pool, when she submits to Felix's repeated violations, she is playing the death game. She can injure herself fatally on the trampoline, drown in the pool, die at Felix's hands, yet she must obsessively continue to do these things until she is stopped, either by another's intervention or by her own body's collapse. Enid plays the game to demonstrate her control over herself and her life. Death, however, is not what Enid wants. When she is repeatedly frozen by the death-panic fear, when she is gripped with desire to destroy herself, the panic represents Enid's suppression of that desire. The death panic is, as Oates says, "the resistance" (127). Being able to "let herself go" into *life*, not death, is the challenge Enid Maria faces. And because she keeps "inappropriate" desires suppressed, Angel-face must exist as a repository for the unsafe desires. Such stark division allows her to cultivate both her intellectual and sensual sides without daily conscious conflicts. The problem with Enid's choosing not to integrate the intellectual and sexual sides of herself, however, is that she becomes a ticking time bomb as the conflict builds. In *You Must Remember This*, the bomb nearly explodes twice: first, when Enid attempts suicide after Felix sexually assaults her at the Villa Rideau; second, when after having learned that she is pregnant, she tries unsuccessfully to get hit by a truck at an intersection (371).

Enid is in constant conflict with her repressed Angel-face side. In the first chapter of Section One, Oates lists the ways in which Angel-face subverts Enid in daily life. When Angel-face is in ascendance, Enid is surprised to find her bureau

drawers rumpled, her money and library books lost, and her schoolwork mislaid. The presence of Angel-face is unnerving for the orderly Enid. She is quite clearly afraid that Angel-face's impulses will get her killed. Enid might run into traffic or jump off the trestle bridge when this treacherous personality takes command: "the tug, the pull, the impulse to climb over the railing and fall, drown" (87). Enid is in constant fear of her own death at the hands of this prodding personality,<sup>13</sup> so afraid that she names the agitated feelings she gets when Angel-face is in charge "the death panic." As Oates's narrator frequently points out, Enid's strong resistance to the death panic can be determined by the intensity of her response each time it arises. Angel-face is always at the helm when the death panic seizes Enid. She hears it as a voice urging: "Do it! You can't be stopped! - and the Death-panic would sweep over her leaving her dumb, cold, her very soul struck dumb...." (87).

While Enid does her best to ignore Angel-face's voice, she is unable to keep Angel-face at bay when, as a young teenager, she drinks liquor. Enid Maria's defenses completely collapse when she drinks. Even a few drops change her perceptions. When Enid takes liquor,

Angel-face poked her way forward, cheeky, giggling, having drunk two or was it three cups of the dago-red wine while Enid Maria stood aside abashed and alarmed at her behavior (98).

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<sup>13</sup>According to Moore and Fine's *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, depersonalization is defined as an "alteration in the perception of the self, such that the usual sense of one's reality is temporarily lost or changed. One's perception of oneself splits into a detached, observing self, and a participating or experiencing self, together with a feeling of self estrangement or unreality about the latter. The feeling of unreality is basic to the phenomenon...In the literature there is apparent agreement that depersonalization is the 'outcome of an intrapsychic conflict which the ego utilizes, in a more or less unsuccessful way, various defenses against anxiety' (Arlow 1966 459 in Moore 52).

Associations that Enid has internalized from playing childhood games with her father combine with the liquor she has imbibed and her need for intense sensation to trigger her traumatic dissociation at Felix's hands. Before Felix assaults her, Enid has fond memories of playing hide-and-seek with her sisters and father at his second-hand furniture store. In Enid's memory her father would "seek out his naughty little girls to set them squealing in terror and delight" (82). When Felix bounds up the steps to the Villa Rideau, teasing, saying, "Don't come up here, don't open the wrong door if you do," (105) Enid's perceptions are skewed by alcohol. She recalls playing with her father, and fails to register any danger signals from Felix. Even when she remembers the smell in "the terrible cellar at the Stevick's store where the drains clogged - a place they weren't supposed to play" (105), Enid can't make a prudent judgement about the impending danger in playing this game with her uncle. She trembles with excitement, tiptoeing up the stairs. Enid is, at this point, completely controlled by Angel-face, whose desires are camouflaged as memories of harmless play with her father.

Other complexes, or clusters of associations with feelings attached to them, also make Enid vulnerable to Felix. When Enid is a child, her father wants to take her and her siblings to see Uncle Felix in a title match. Her mother Hannah angrily objects to Lyle's bringing the children to such a violent event. During the couple's ensuing argument, Lyle colludes with his littlest girl by winking at her. Enid takes

the wink to mean, "Daddy and his littlest girl have a secret understanding and Momma is excluded" (26-27). With Lyle's action, Enid's Oedipal<sup>14</sup> desire for her father's exclusive love is kindled. Years later, on the beach at Shoal Lake, just hours before he assaults her, when he asks, "Want to be my sweetheart, Sweetheart," (102) Felix inadvertently triggers Enid's desire to replace her mother. As a child at the boxing match, peace-loving Enid, afraid that the violence will overwhelm her, does not look at the bloody action in the ring. "She knows that if she looks, she will see something she [isn't] supposed to see" (28). Years later at the Villa Rideau, Enid is afraid again to really see the scene unfolding with Felix. Curiosity overcomes her fear, however, and she walks into a sexual situation that will change her life.

Chapter 3 of "The Green Island" clearly sets out the central personality traits of Enid and her autonomous self, Angel-face. The fact that they have such opposite characteristics suggests that Enid believes she could not integrate Angel-face's risk-taking, intense sexuality and crudeness without damaging her "good" personality. Viewed in this light, Angel-face can be seen as a manifestation of a defense mechanism created by Enid to protect herself. A defense mechanism is employed by the ego to protect itself against dangers, "typically, loss of the love object, loss of the object's love, castration and superego disapproval - and their

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<sup>14</sup>The Oedipal desire, according to Moore and Fine, is described as a "characteristic constellation (in both sexes) of instinctual drives, aims, object relations, fears, and identifications, universally manifest at the height of the phallic phase (two and a half to six years), but persisting as an unconscious organizer throughout life. During the phallic period, the child strives for a sexual union...with the parent of the opposite sex and wishes for the death or the disappearance of the parent of the same sex" (Moore 133).

attendant unpleasant affects during development and throughout life" (Moore 48). Angel-face becomes the underground stream for Enid's repressed sexuality. Angel-face's voice is blunt, crass; it judges, complains, hurls street language in Enid's ear, always urging her to precipitate action. Angel-face is "derisive and bored" (37), detached, fidgety. " 'Oh shit'," Angel-face says in church, "yawning, grinning - 'when is this going to end?'" (37). When Angel-face is dominant, the "world crack[s] open, fracturing along invisible fault lines where you did things you didn't intend" (41). Enid's sexual relationship with Felix supports the idea of Enid's partial knowledge of Angel-face. Oates sets out the limits of Enid's consciousness at the start of the third section of Part One of the novel, "The Green Island": "Once there was Enid Maria and there was Angel-face but Enid Maria knew very little about Angel-face while Angel-face knew everything about Enid Maria" (36).

Enid craves a place in the social establishment. When she daydreams about coiffed hair and a "bracelet gleaming on her wrist" (97), Angel-face hastens to warn her to forget her long-term goals in favour of instant gratification. Angel-face refuses to see Felix's behaviour as abusive; she allows Felix to dictate how she should view what happens to her, even as he rapes her. Felix tells her he is teaching her so she can love others later, that he is doing this for her, that he would never hurt her. When Felix tells Enid "she's hot for it" as he rapes her, the critical, questioning Enid is suspended, silenced, and the thrill-seeking Angel-face does not question his opinions. After Enid has sex with Felix, however, the

narrator lets the reader clearly see the cessation of Angel-face's presence, and the return of Enid Maria as the dominant personality. Oates signals Enid's return by "a sudden rush of fear and repugnance" (347) while she showers after sex. Enid understands at this moment that within the fragment of Angel-face she has "lost all will, all consciousness" (347). Angel-face may no longer be in ascendance here, but her power is still palpable, because Enid Maria feels out of balance until Angel-face's appetites are momentarily sated, and the two parts are in "equilibrium" (222), "her two selves perfectly balanced" (222).

There are some benefits to Enid's compartmentalizing her sexual needs as Angel-face. With the incestuous sexual liaison safely sealed off in a fragment, Enid Maria is free to "cultivate her own quick restless analytic intelligence" (225). Enid Maria can always access the wealth of imagination in Angel-face's personality for purposes other than sex. For Angel-face, the world is always "vivid, piercing, tremulous" (225). [The lying Enid resorts to in order to live her double life comes from Angel-face's fertile imagination.] Inventing stories is one of Angel-face's strengths (259). Music is another area where both Enid Maria and Angel-face share the benefits of a skill. Concrete activities, like the practice of hand movements, learning scores, lessons with stern Mr. Lesnovitch, fall to organized, plodding Enid. The comfort, consolation and joy in the playing, however, is Angel-face's "secret consolation, like her obsession with Felix" (262).

Oates explicitly shows the power of Angel-face when Felix's refusal to wear a condom results in Enid's pregnancy. During the early weeks of the baby's

gestation, Enid is surprised to find that "another person seemed to be pushing forward, reckless, happy, all flesh and heat, urging mad thoughts upon her" (371). In this section, Angel-face once again brings an intense death wish into Enid's life, "the pull of something vast and dark and sweet she couldn't have given a name to" (371). Enid, controlled by the Angel-face fragment, once again attempts suicide. This time in a "delirium of excitement" (371), she runs towards a cement mixer that is crossing an intersection. When Angel-face is not hit, the personality of Enid Maria returns to dominance and she no longer has the courage to commit suicide.

Oates's non-fiction work *On Boxing*<sup>15</sup> is helpful in clarifying the role of Felix in the novel and the connection between Felix as a boxer and Felix's attitudes in his sexual encounters with Enid. Felix personifies the reality of evil in *You Must Remember This*. He brings evil into a young adolescent's life. Felix conducts his life on the understanding that one is always contending with evil. He is one of Oates's most complex characters: a truncated child, a destructive boxing machine, a rapist, a would-be lover, an evil, yet sometimes nurturing, father figure. Felix requires dominance and control over all the things in his world. He measures all male behaviour against his heroes from the boxing world. Like Oates's mythical boxer in *On Boxing*, he channels his anger into boxing because there "anger is accommodated, ennobled ... rage can be transposed without equivocation into art"

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<sup>15</sup>The abbreviation *OB*, followed by the page number in parentheses will be used to indicate the first parenthetical citation from Oates's in this section about her text *On Boxing*. References to *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart* that might be confused with citations to *On Boxing* will be followed by the word *Bitter* and the page numbers in parentheses.)

(OB 63). Like Oates's male archetype in *On Boxing*, Felix powerfully asserts himself by inflicting pain. His actions in the elevated boxing ring (19) are legally permitted. The roped-off space assumes mystical proportions, becoming "an altar of sorts" (19). On that altar, Felix becomes a luminous symbol of masculinity (59), valued for being savage (74), a potential killer. As a boxer, he is rewarded for inflicting violence on others (93). When Oates describes Felix, present-continuous verbs dominate; he is constantly performing actions: fighting, driving, having sex, doing. He is a boxer, the type of person whom Oates describes in *On Boxing* as "an action" (167). In boxing Felix creates his own world. The elevated ring and the intense atmosphere create an illuminated space where only time and beating one's opponent matter. When Felix wins, the approval he gets from the spectators temporarily satiates his unfulfilled childhood desires for love and affection. But he has disappointed himself, his family, and his fans by losing a title match in Detroit, in October, 1948 against Gino Corvino. At the time of his defeat, Felix is fourth in line for the world title which Rocky Graziano holds. After 28 wins and no losses, Felix makes a terrible mistake, "getting angry with his opponent, getting emotional" (*Bitter* 167). He loses, and retires from boxing after this stinging defeat. Now Felix continues to relate to the world as a boxer. His response in every matter is quick, unmediated either by thought or the application of moral principles. He demands submission as a condition for those wishing to relate to him in personal, sexual or business matters. Having had notoriety keeps Felix isolated after his defeat. As the former boxing hope of Port Oriskany, Felix

remains separate, and in his view, superior to the townsfolk. He drives expensive new cars, he has criminally suspect connections, and he has money to spend, that go far beyond the normal reach of a Port Oriskany citizen.

The fact that Felix acts on his instincts both attracts and injures Enid. When Enid's intense need to be acknowledged as an adult triggers Felix's intense response at having his defenses penetrated, Enid "must" be violated, in Felix's view. She has asked for "it," is ready for "it." He thinks *she* is culpable for *his* assault on her. Enid's "sexual invitation" to Felix consists of punching him when he does not see the punch coming, of "letting" her bathing suit strap fall off her shoulder, of getting hot and sweaty. In Felix's view, Enid accepts his invitation to have sex when she accepts his offer of going for a ride with him, of responding to his playful injunction NOT to follow him up the stairs. The energy Enid senses in Felix, the heat he gives off, is his accommodation of rage. The adolescent Enid is attracted to Felix because he embodies an emotional place where the "world is conceived in anger and in hatred and in hunger - no less than it is conceived in love" (*OB* 68). Felix is dangerous, and danger is what the Angel-face side of Enid seeks.

Felix's serpentine scar, the mark of a fallen man, is a fissure-like line, acquired when his forehead was cut open in his devastating boxing defeat. The scar is frequently alluded to in *You Must Remember This*. When scarred Felix first dances with the innocent Enid at Anne-Marie Pauley's wedding, Enid's dress becomes stained. When Enid discovers that her dress is stained, she can no longer

suppress her unconscious needs. The stain of dancing with Felix has let out her Angel-face side. She begins to masturbate every night. Her need to masturbate correlates with her need to "slip through Felix's guard" (99) on the beach and make her mark. Felix, Enid's tempter, has a serpent's lair - an airless, tomb-like place, whose window allows in only "a thin crack of light" (225). Aside from the bed, and the sofa, (things to lie on), the apartment is devoid of personal expression. The walls are blank; there are no pictures, no mirrors, no curtains, no carpet. Enid sees it rightly as a grave (226). Here the serpent can devour Enid at his leisure. When Enid is inside Felix's lair, she gives her fragmented self to him. When she has sex with him, she is temporarily dissociated, "her brain gone dark," (224) from the violent flaring of her physical sexual response. Afterwards, spent, she lies "exhausted, too weak to move" (224).

What looks like blind love in this section is addiction to the abusive pattern Felix has set up. Oates gives a number of indications that Enid's affair with the flawed Felix is not a free out-pouring of affection. Before Enid goes to Felix's apartment, "she becomes nervous high-strung ... intense" (223), to such an extent that her behaviour irritates the piano teacher, Mr. Lesnovich. During one piano lesson, Enid is anticipating a storm outside (223), but it does not materialize; nevertheless, the fierce storm of emotion when Angel-face dissociates from Enid during sex with Felix's does. For Enid, each sexual event with Felix is the "first time" (186). Each event extinguishes her mind (186). In all Enid's encounters with him, Felix steadfastly ignores the signals she gives off when she is

in distress. When Enid claims she is ready for full intercourse, for example, she is actually squirming, sweat is running down her body, her mouth is dry (181-82). At orgasm there is no joy, just her eyeballs rolling back, and "her lips drawn back in a death's head grimace from her teeth" (182). Sometimes Enid even makes "frightened sounds like those of a small child being beaten" (182). Once, when Felix is having sex with Enid in the shower and she stops participating, "letting her arms drop to her sides, as if she'd suddenly lost all will, even consciousness," Enid realizes that Felix "must have known and must not have cared" that he was hurting her (347). After this particular sexual encounter, Enid understands that this fragment Angel-face can only live when in thrall to Felix. "She knew then that she could not draw a single breath without him, she was dead" (225). In the midst of sex with Felix, Enid feels her sexual response as a profound change, a "conscious" dissociation, a match to paper, a flame, "flaring violently upward . . . not to be stopped" (225).

What Enid fails to see, however, is that she is the one who has been metaphorically killed by Felix. Felix is substituting Enid for the "self-referential world" (*OB* 13) of the boxing ring. He can no longer box with his "shadow self - or Death" in the ring (18), so, in an action that looks like a controlled approach to an opponent, Felix jabs at her with his penis. Each thrust proves that he can continue to live; each responding grip or "clutching back" (224) on Enid's part releases him into more intense thrusting, just as jabs in the ring used to release him into hitting his opponent. At these times Felix feels truly alive. Felix embodies an

emotional place where the rage, desire, and need intersect. He is dangerous, and danger is what the Angel-face side seeks, to the detriment of Enid. Felix transposes his rage into sexual arousal. He empties his hurt self into Enid, just as he used to "accommodate, ennoble" (OB 63) and empty his rage onto his opponent in the ring. As a boxer, Felix's value lay in being a killer" ( 74); as a so-called lover of Enid, Felix dominates and tries to kill her independent sexual self. Enid is not really Felix's lover - she is his opponent. His task is to gain full mastery of her. That this is a heinous and immoral act rarely occurs to Felix. In fact, in many sections of the book, Felix says with utter self-conviction that he would never hurt Enid.

This discrepancy between what Felix says and what he does is clearest in Section Three of *You Must Remember This*, "Shelter," when Felix, driving by Enid's high school, spots Enid in a "world that excludes him" (313). The sense of loss Felix experiences when he realizes he is excluded from this part of Enid's life is like "[t]he sky-blue day opening up like a fracture in Felix Stevick's skull, letting in too much light." The fracture, the fissure, the gap opens - and Felix begins to dissociate. That the split is about to happen is evident when Felix sees Enid's "narrow-hipped figure" (311). She is surrounded by young teenagers. He feels a "flame [running] over his brain" (311) as he fragments. Felix suddenly brakes his car and demands that Enid get in. Anger is the emotion that fuels Felix's fragmentation. It is directed at a tall boy with a crewcut who calls to Enid. "Felix thought how beautiful it would be to smash in the boy's face, break the nose in one

clean blow" (313). The anger, combined with the smell of panic emanating from Enid, triggers a strong sexual response in Felix. He projects his sexualization of Enid onto her. He notices how she looks and sexualizes it. "She looks good and she knows it" (313), he thinks. Her sweater is buttoned provocatively, she looks a little slutty, she is showing her "small hard breasts" (313). Ignoring the fact that Enid's fist is clenched, that she is reluctant to come with him, Felix speeds away, with Enid unwillingly beside him in the car. He uses the edginess he feels to speed up his re-formulation of what has already happened. "He wasn't angry," he decides, "he was in a good mood" (315), he had "just happened to stop to take her with him" (314).

Oates shows Enid trying to control her panic in this section. She sits stiffly, just "baring her teeth" (315) and her smile is more like a pained grimace. She speaks to Felix of her obligations in school, in a "slow deliberate voice" (316) - a quiz in chemistry, a project for English class, a study hall group - but Enid's "shallow quickened breath" (316) reveals her intense fear. Enid's fear is the trigger that liberates Felix to hurt her. "He liked being just a little angry with Enid, it made him feel less guilty fucking her; what he might do might be part of her punishment" (317). To get himself primed to rape her, Felix begins to ask questions with sexual overtones about Enid and her friends. "[W]hat would you and that kid be if you weren't 'just friends'?" (318). At the thought of Enid having sex with the young man, Felix's head "ache[s] behind his eyes . . ." (318); [the] "harsh light" of this idea "pierced him like a blade" (318). Now he extends his

interrogation of Enid to include the others in the group. He asks Enid what she does with them, whether she does "[t]hings he taught her," whether she is "fucking around with them" (319). He concludes his questioning by threatening to kill Enid and whoever else she has sex with. "I'll kill you," Felix says (319). "[I]t infuriated him that Enid held herself so stiff, so frightened" (319). The idea of Enid being frightened activates Felix's visceral response, and he loses himself in a fantasy of what he would like to do to Enid sexually. When Enid whispers, "I hate you," as she escapes from the car, Felix's fight instinct is ignited. After catching the frightened girl, Felix takes her to Roosevelt Park where, just before he completely dissociates, still believing, still saying that he will "never hurt" her, he rapes Enid "exactly as he'd wanted" (321). He is now completely dissociated. Through Enid, Felix achieves the cessation of pain he previously had found in boxing:

Felix's mind - everything gone into sensation, thrumming his nerves like being punched really hard on the point of the chin so you're beyond pain, there isn't any pain ...but it felt sweet (320).

In *You Must Remember This*, drinking liquor signals a gap in Felix opening up that will allow him to do what he wants to do to Enid without feeling culpable. Felix usually makes the transition from sexual arousal to sexual assault with the help of liquor. He uses liquor as an anaesthetic, a means of dissociating. If he is not fully aware, then he is not fully responsible for doing what he wishes to do to Enid. In her description of Felix taking Enid's virginity, Oates creates one of the most tawdry scenes in the text. Felix draws the shades and curtains tightly, locks and bolts the shabby room's door, doses Enid with scotch and, slipping a towel under

her, breaks her hymen as he enters her. Oates notes that Enid's legs are weak, her fingers "panicked" and shaking, the insides of her thighs "chafed raw" (190). She is bleeding. Enid is unable to escape the flood of emotions by dissociating; she has not, she realized, been able to get "drunk enough" beforehand. Enid feels that "Felix [is] fucking her to death" (191). Getting to the mental safety of the paths in the wallpaper is impossible now. She realizes on the way home that "he'd raped her and he'd loved it!!" (193). She determines that this will not remain a secret. This determination saves her later.

Felix remains fragmented in his dealings with Enid until she explodes at him in the hours after her bloody abortion. Then, his defenses penetrated once again by her sudden and profound anger, Felix does not have time to cut off his feelings, or to anaesthetize his sense of guilt. Enid's surprise attack makes all Felix's losses clear to him: he has previously lost his parents; now he is losing Enid, his connection with Lyle's family, his potential bond with his unborn dead child. Unable to deal with his intense feelings of guilt and loss, and craving punishment, Felix consciously brings on dissociation through liquor. Using alcohol as a pathway to oblivion, Felix enters a severe downward alcoholic spiral after Enid's abortion. His alcoholic state, however, fails to erase his guilt for the death of his child or for the serious emotional and physical injury he has caused Enid. He admits to himself that "he'd harmed her. Because she trusted him and he was a shit" (399). At the start of the downward spiral, he recites a fabricated story to anyone who will listen about a younger sister's premature baby dying, and of his

great sense of loss about it. He becomes impotent with Charlotte Sansom, his partner's wife, loses interest in backing new boxers, discards his guns. He begins to initiate fights. First, unmasked, Felix beats up a pimp on behalf of a prostitute; then he initiates a number of fights in bars to blot out his feelings. "[N]ow he was beginning to see the advantage of being punch drunk, life got simplified, didn't it, flat like a playing card with no depth" (408). He feels "detached, bemused...drifting helpless as smoke, out of his body" (408). Leroy Pearl takes brutal revenge on Felix for his son Jo-Jo's death at the hands of the Mattiuzzios by brutally beating Felix in a public washroom. Felix completely detaches, observing his beaten body on the floor, yet hopeful "he'd slip through and escape" (410), as he had in his first boxing match. Felix now craves abuse at the hands of others to atone for what he has done. The intense feelings of wrongdoing Felix experiences during this alcoholic binge are the culmination of guilty feelings Felix has experienced and denied from the beginning of the text.

Boxers are not expected to feel guilt for inflicting injuries, yet Felix clearly does experience guilt with regard to Enid. When he learns of Enid's suicide attempt, guilt, combined with self-preservation, prompts one of his first questions: "Did she leave a note?" (158). Guilt transposes his worry *about* Enid into anger *at* her. "Goddamn her. Trying to manipulate him" (159). Felix realizes that Enid has almost died "[b]ecause of him" (160), and so guiltily resolves to kill himself, if she should die, by driving drunk on the expressway. When he goes to see her at the hospital, he worries that Enid's parents will "know" if they see him, so he leaves

instead. Thinking about their childish game of hide-and-seek, he admits to himself that perhaps Enid had not known what the "it" was that she wanted, that he had had to be drunk to do "it" to her (175). He makes phone calls to the hospital and to the Stevicks from the bar. After hearing Lizzie's say that Enid's suicide attempt was *not* an accident, Felix's guilt propels him to go from one bar to another to try to block out what he has done to his niece. Felix's guilt also surfaces in the pragmatic things he does for the Stevick family. He buys Enid a spinet and pays the \$15 per hour for her piano lessons. He gives Lyle his opinion about the dangers of Lizzie's chosen career as a singer. He buys an RCA phonograph and records. He buys Enid presents, jewellery. For Enid's sixteenth birthday, five weeks after he has formally taken her virginity, Felix gives her a silver heart trimmed in gold.

Felix's guilt has a pattern: denial, admission, explanation, blame. When Felix picks up Enid hitch hiking sometime after the first rape, guilt shows in his quick denial of the incident. To Enid's "I didn't tell anyone," Felix snaps back, "Didn't tell anyone what!" (132). When Enid cries at this denial, he says,

I'm sorry for what happened. Jesus Christ I'm disgusted. I'm not that kind of shit really! - taking advantage of a girl your age my own brother's daughter I'm not that kind of man (132).

Felix makes a distinction between his actions drunk and sober and so acknowledges his fragmentation. He claims the attack only happened because he was drunk. Felix's admission and apology quickly turns to blame. He accuses Enid of "leading [him] on, fooling around the way you did" (132). A blow to the

side of Enid's face completes the pattern.

Felix's conscious guilt about his actions recalls Adam's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. There is evidence in *You Must Remember This* that Oates views her text as a recreation of human life during and after the Fall. Felix, with his snake-like scar is the serpent; Enid is Eve. The Green Island, or l'Isle-Verte, where Felix first sexually abuses Enid, is the landscape of a fallen paradise. The water at the lake is "glittering ... like a snake's scales." The property is decrepit, the vegetation withered. There are "fissures in the forecourt" (96) of the Inn. These small cracks, where weeds poke through, flaw the landscape and signal the defiled nature of the place. In Oates's picture of a fallen paradise, Enid makes a crack in her uncle Felix's defenses with an unchecked blow to his body. Though Enid's conscious intention is not sexual, her sudden determination to be taken seriously by her uncle on the beach is the equivalent of Eve's offering the apple to Adam (165). In the biblical story, once the apple has been bitten, Adam regards Eve with sexual desire, and they are banished from paradise. In *You Must Remember This*, once Enid penetrates Felix's barriers by hitting him, Felix is sexually aroused by her action. Being a man of sensation and not thought, Felix abruptly brings Enid's innocent childhood to an end by virtually raping her,<sup>16</sup> and they are both expelled

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<sup>16</sup>Anne Redmon, in her article "Vision and Risk: New Fiction by Oates and Ozick," refers to Enid's relationship with Felix as a "torrid and incestuous love affair" (Redmon 203):

"It is perhaps because she senses that there is no room for erotic gratification within the pale of the conventional married life that Enid *allows herself to become molested*. She and her glitzy ex-boxer uncle spar on the beach, in the dark; *she gets through his defenses* and drunkenly, he takes this as an invitation" (203 my italics).

metaphorically from the Garden of Eden.

For the Stevick family, the whole area of Shoal Lake has already been stained by the past suicide of Karl Stevick, Felix's father, in his luxurious home there. The Stevick family members are ashamed, and deny any familial connection with Karl (21). The fact that he served as mayor of Port Oriskany and had, before losing his fortune in the Depression, been worth several million dollars has been erased by the family's shame. After Karl's suicide, Lyle and his half-brother Felix become Cain and Abel, brothers expelled from the Garden of Eden. In the Muslim tradition of the Cain story, (Siepmann 149), "Cain refuses to follow his father's directives in marriage and, instead, marries Aclima, his twin sister." For this act, God rejects Cain's sacrifice. Felix Stevick follows the same pattern in the text, choosing to sleep with his brother's daughter, an act for which he must suffer by becoming an outcast in Port Oriskany after Enid's abortion. By raping Enid, Felix tries to retrieve his family. He is willing to violate the incest taboo to do so, as long as he can protect himself from full emotional knowledge of what he has done. In the fallen world in which the banished brothers find themselves after their father's suicide, both men have lost their positions as property owners. Lost status and the stain of suicide have made Lyle as sarcastic, derisive and pessimistic about

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Redmon argues that Oates writes about Felix and Enid as two lovers - "a writing that embodies the sheer force of sensual pleasure these two lovers derive from one another" (206). She argues that the union of Enid and Felix is spiritual - an "archetypal region where incest is a royal union" (206). Redmon denies in her text that Oates could be dealing with abuse in her depiction of Enid and Felix, saying that if this were the case, "Enid would not withstand such a battering from a relative without substantial cracks appearing in her everyday behavior" (206). The whole idea of dissociation because of trauma would argue against Redmon's hypothesis, as the dissociated fragment would not interfere with the dominant personality.

life as it has made Felix angry, defensive and coiled to attack. In his fallen state, Lyle now can only occasionally afford to rent a "shanty" (101) near the lake, and Felix has to join forces with Al Sanson, a man known to engage in shady business deals, to renovate the dilapidated property on the once paradisaal island.

Oates enlarges the idea of a fallen paradise by demonstrating that the entire Stevick family has been distorted by Karl Stevick's legacy of abandonment and suicide. In the Stevick family, memory controls the fate of individuals. Lyle constantly lives in the shadow of time and events he is unable to alter. He is acutely aware of the inevitable decay of his body, and of the impossibility of altering history. Lyle Stevick is damaged by Karl's abandonment: first when Karl chooses another wife over his mother; second, when he favours Felix over both Lyle and his sibling, Father Domenic; third, when he commits suicide. *Shame* in abandonment, *shame* in suicide, *shame* in loss of a fortune all make Lyle feel impotent as a provider, parent and husband. Despite his education, Lyle is a poor financial provider for his family. He consistently fails to understand his three daughters. His eldest, Geraldine, is already pregnant when she marries. She so fully identifies with her wife and mother roles that Lyle no longer has anything to say to her. He does not understand his second daughter Lizzie's craving for glamour and fame in the entertainment world; he does not see that she needs to express her sexuality overtly because of the drabness, suppressed sexuality, and lack of success in her own family. Lyle's biggest failure in understanding his children, however, is his blindness to Enid's plight, even after she attempts suicide.

When Lyle and Enid are in the underground shelter, he interprets her tears as worry about whether he can protect her from nuclear holocaust. He cannot see that something is wrong in her personal life. In the text, Lyle rarely understands his wife Hannah's need for personal expression beyond her family commitments. He is "lightly mocking, teasing, incredulous" (346) when Hannah and Aunt Ingrid become professional dressmakers (344), even though Hannah becomes "markedly less irritable" (346) and begins to dress in a way that reflects her new self-image.

Lyle also fails to engage his educated intelligence in a career. Because of his strong sexual desire as a youth, Lyle begets a family before he can establish himself professionally. Like a piece of second-hand furniture that he sells, Lyle stations himself over a dusty, rodent-infested cellar. There he stores extra merchandise; there he keeps a coiled rope that he considers his suicide option. It is in this basement that Lyle keeps the shame of his father's suicide alive. Karl Stevick's abandonment of Lyle and his mother, and his marriage to a common showgirl, Ursula Mohr, fuel his bitter resentment of Felix, and trigger Lyle's intense anger at anyone who rejects him, or fails to give him due recognition. Lyle sees Felix as a constant reminder of the shame Karl Stevick has brought on him. In any situation where he is rejected, Lyle's complex about being abandoned is triggered. This cluster of strong feelings and emotional associations is first seen when Lyle brings his children to Felix's boxing match in 1947. The complex is worth examining in detail to discern Lyle's pattern of thought, as the feelings and associations that form his complex come together in an accelerated fashion, and

result in his temporary fragmentation.

After Felix's boxing victory, Lyle and his family make their way back to congratulate him. A policeman blocks Lyle's way by poking him in the chest with a billy club. This action makes Lyle believe that "the Stevicks had one and all been insulted that night at the very hour of Felix's triumph" (33). His language changes, becoming crude and racist. He calls the strangers who are being welcomed before him "Eyetalian wops, sons of bitches, scum of the earth" (33), just like Felix. He declares that boxing is nothing but "a low vicious primitive sport" (33), and Felix a blood-thirsty savage who deserves what he got in a fight which might even have been "thrown."

Lyle attacks the media reporters as hysteria and hyperbole pedlars, and dismisses their praise of Felix as undeserved. In his view, their excessive praise gives the boxer "erroneous ideas about the universe" (26). The word universe triggers Lyle's knowledge of great philosophers like Schopenhauer. The Schopenhaurean view that "we are all in the grip of the blind Will" (34) leads Lyle to an attack on the Catholic Church and "self righteous prigs" (34) like his brother Domenic, who mouth the Church's "self-serving pronouncements" (34) on marriage and birth control, dicta which ruin others' lives. The statement that people's lives are ruined by the Church's teachings abruptly brings Lyle out of his complex-induced train of thought and back to the object of his anger, Felix, the mark of his family's shame.

Shaken, Lyle recognizes that Felix the Cat is too agile to be caught in the

Church's grip. At the same moment, Lyle realizes that he, Lyle, *is* caught. Lyle, not Felix, is the one who is on a roller coaster of a bumpy marriage; it is he who is scared and worn out. The only escape Lyle can visualize is "jumping off the goddamn thing and breaking [his] neck" (284). On the way home, with the children in the car, he experiences intense shame, lashing out at Felix as a "selfish bastard, immoral and scandalous" (34), then blocking out this painful recognition by "brak[ing] the car to a jolting stop" (34) to go to the Canal House Tavern for an hour of drinking.

During Lyle's "emotional storm," he distances himself from Felix, defining Felix as "other," and "Eyetalian wop."<sup>17</sup> The "other," for the philosophical Lyle, is the savage, primitive and self-interested. These are qualities Lyle cannot acknowledge in himself. For Lyle, desire is "like a telephone ringing in a distant" room (278). Only later in the text, when Lyle cares about himself and his family enough to build his bomb shelter, when he is able to connect again sexually to Hannah, will he no longer be subject to a "complex reaction" such as this.

When Lyle is not in the grip of an emotional storm, his mental state is dominated by feelings of futility and terror which are imaged in a recurring dream. This nightmare about Karl Stevick threatens Lyle's sanity. In Lyle's dream, his father is dead but still watchful, lying in the next room with his eyes open. Lyle is in an underground low-ceilinged room whose walls and ceiling press in on him. In

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<sup>17</sup>According to Drs. Moore and Fine "[W]hen complexes come into play [become constellated], they contribute to behaviour and affect whether a person is conscious of them or not" (19).

the dream, Lyle is unable to get to the "next" room to his father, and feels terrified that he will go insane. Lyle's sees no way out of his life script except to die like his father. Yet, if he does not join his father, he fears he will also die by losing his mind. In the text, Lyle's journey is from this paralysis and unconscious merging with his father, to individuation and the rejection of a suicide script. By the end of the text, he is empowered both physically and spiritually to live. He exchanges the underground nightmare for the dream of building an underground bomb shelter, a place where he can protect his family.

When he builds the shelter, Lyle again becomes a potent male. The uncontaminated place he builds is also underground, but the white walls of his dream have been replaced by the luminous interior of the shelter which soothes him and lessens his sense of fear. Lyle sees these walls as a "mysterious part of his own soul" (325). Here he finds emotional distance from the anti-communist fanaticism of the day. "[A]nger or grief or even despair" (325) at world events is replaced by "mild amusement" (325), as he is now safe. Inside his bomb shelter, with his periscope, Lyle has a new and unique angle of vision on the world. Like an artist's eye, the periscope transforms the familiar into something new. "There was an air of dreamlike beauty to those fugitive visions pressed close against his eye" (324).

Among the books Lyle brings into his shelter are Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Shakespeare's tragedies. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a dominant motif in Oates's configuration of Lyle Stevick. Oates portrays Lyle in

the text as a modern-day King Lear, terrified of the madness he sees in himself, and threatened with losing his ability to rule. But where Lear begins with a kingdom to divide amongst his three daughters, Lyle does not have a kingdom worth passing on at the beginning of the text. His second-hand store is full of other people's castoffs, and does not reflect his brilliance. His lungs are contaminated from working at Cyanamid, and the polluted air in the Clinton Street area threatens his family. He consistently settles for second choices in love and in work. Lyle's wife, Hannah, is the woman he impregnated, not the woman he first loved. The woman he had loved, Elizabeth, a wealthy daughter of a Jewish furrier, had been beyond Lyle's social reach. Lyle is emotionally distant from Hannah. "Long ago he had stopped loving [Hannah] and then he'd stopped making love to her as well" (213) because of the Catholic Church's stand on birth control.

Oates expresses how deeply unloved Hannah feels by presenting her as a female who is nearly mute in the text. Instead of speaking, Hannah presents her emotional problems somatically. Hannah is detached from her body, viewing her flesh as her "burden and responsibility" (279). She is plagued with ill health and infections. Hannah has fainting spells and kidney infections. She frequently feels unable to breathe. Lyle feels helpless to deal with Hannah and her problems until he starts to build the bomb shelter, and tries acting on his fantasy of seducing Elvira French. The shelter and the object of his affection, Elvira, are symbols of his search for empowerment, and ultimately help Lyle return to Hannah with love.

Enid is Lyle's favourite daughter as Cordelia was Lear's. In Shakespeare's

play, Cordelia refuses to be untruthful to her father, which results in Lear banishing her. Enid's relationship with Felix results in Enid's virtual self-banishment from the family for the duration of the incestuous sexual liaison. In the Shakespearean tragedy, Lear stands unprotected on the heath, almost naked. He understands that man is no more than "a poor, bare, forked animal" (III.iv 109-10). When Lyle emerges from his shelter he, like Lear, feels "exposed and vulnerable, standing on the surface of the earth with only a thin membrane of skin and flesh to protect him" (330). There are other similarities in the texts of *King Lear* and *You Must Remember This*. Lyle Stevick, like Lear, is completely engrossed in his family problems. In *King Lear*, Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester, betrays Lear. In *You Must Remember This*, Felix, a rejected half-brother, a virtual bastard, betrays Lyle by raping his under-age daughter. As Edmund is the vehicle for Lear's unravelling, so too is Felix a vehicle for unravelling in *You Must Remember This*. Felix, however, also has the capacity to help rebuild. His actions ravage Enid and have the potential to devastate the whole Stevick family, yet he also helps both Enid and Lyle fulfill their dreams with his ill-gotten money. By abusing Lyle's daughter before his unseeing eyes, Felix exposes the deteriorated condition of the Stevicks' family dynamic; by lending Lyle money for the shelter, and paying for his daughter's music lessons, Felix rescues both his half-brother and his niece.

While Lyle Stevick's character bears many similarities to Lear's character, Lyle is not, in the end, a tragic figure. Lear wants to "crawl toward death" ... [u]nburthened" (*King Lear* I:i, 41-43). Lyle, however, is only temporarily

paralyzed by the death script he has inherited from his father. When he decides to build the shelter, he is looking towards the future with hope, despite the danger of nuclear holocaust. By the end of the novel, he views life as a gift, not a burden, and embraces it. Lyle learns the lessons of the 1931 song, "As Time Goes By," from which the title of the book is taken. The Herman Hupfeld song, a popular tune in Lyle and Hannah's youth, was written in 1930. The first part of the song, re-printed in Arnold Shaw's *Let's Dance: Popular Music in the 1930's*, gives an accurate portrayal of the rapid changes in science and technology and the anxieties of the times. In the song, the momentum of change comes up against the individual's need for love and sexual relationships. The song posits the "fight for love and glory" as unchanging for man, no matter what advances are made. The opening stanza of the song pictures the age the young Stevicks live in as being due cause for anxiety. Issues like the atomic bomb threat, the McCarthy hearings, the Rosenberg trial and the Korean War, with which Lyle grapples throughout the text, in the song's words, "give cause for apprehension". Rapid change and the impact of Einstein's theory of relativity are overwhelming, making it essential to "get down to earth, relax, relieve the tension". Lyle adapts his life to the risks of the modern age and lives.

*Gulliver's Travels* also informs Oates's depiction of Lyle Stevick. Swift's work "satirizes man's abuse of human reason as reflected in his political, social and academic institutions" (Siepmann 414). Like Swift, Lyle thinks reason is man's highest capacity. For years he has prided himself on making cogent arguments,

marshalling facts, creating stinging rebuttals in the letters he sends to newspapers. Although Lyle feels that he is a failure, he continues to look at the world with the same derisive attitude as Gulliver viewed his species. Lyle, like Gulliver, thinks "the majority of the natives are the most pernicious Race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (Siepmann 199). In matters of the flesh and his own submerged desire, however, Lyle is a Lilliputian in the land of Brobdingnag. In the shelter, in the epilogue of the novel, when Lyle makes love to Hannah, the reader sees Lyle viewing himself "like poor Lemuel Gulliver crouched atop an enormous breast, the nipple alone enormous, monstrous ..." (435). In his struggle to climax and once more assert his manhood, Lyle imagines posters of Marilyn Monroe, Elvira French, the hat-check girls, all to no avail. Only when Lyle reconnects to his passionate former self, and the "artless and uncritical" eighteen-year-old Hannah Weir to whom he first made love, is the Brobdingnagian world shrunk back to human dimensions (435).

Lyle's son, Warren is quite a different story. He relies on heroes such as Thoreau and Ghandi to guide him, and places all his hope in various political, spiritual and female images: in Adlai Stevenson, in God who "spoke" to him about helping others while he was in the hospital, in his girlfriend, Miriam Brancher. He is permanently wounded, sympathetic and sensitive to others. Warren can see world events clearly, unlike his father, who is emotionally truncated, and sightless with regard to Enid's plight. Warren is physically fragmented from the Korean war. The only Stevick son has a body reassembled by multiple surgeries for injuries

sustained in that war:

[B]its of bone, shrapnel, flesh, he even had a put-together face as he called it - the seams about his jaw weren't perfectly aligned even after two operations, the left eye glared milky and near useless, the bright plastic teeth attached to their partial plate were perhaps too perfect to be believed (107).

At the start of *You Must Remember This*, Oates draws Warren as a clumsy, shamed, thirteen-year-old who stutters when he gets emotional (17), and at the end of the text as a disillusioned law school dropout, protesting U.S. war preparations after fruitless years of giving speeches and handing out leaflets have been ignored (416). Despite all this, Warren is consistently put forward as the one member of the Stevick family who can see clearly. Warren, with his "magnified swimming eye" (148), is witness to the trickle-down effect of U.S. military policies in the 1950s. President Truman's promise to send U.S. arms to Korea means Private Stevick will go to war. After he is injured at Imjun, Warren becomes the symbol of the human fragmentation of war in the text. On the political level, Warren is obsessed with the idea that something must be done to change the direction of U.S. policy and, to this end he directs all his idealistic energy. His heroes, such as Adlai Stevenson, are activists in the political arena, not deceased philosophers like Lyle's intellectual heroes.

Warren learns about the fragility of human life early. As a child, he witnessed a fatal bicycle accident in which an innocent black boy was chased by white youths into the path of a pothole and an oncoming truck. This tragedy becomes the material of his recurring dream. The synchronicity of the event, and

the sudden irrevocable loss of life trigger Warren's understanding of the precariousness of human existence. War deepens his understanding of this uncertainty and of the hazards facing individuals in wartime. The trauma of witnessing and receiving serious bodily harm fragments Warren Stevick's mind as well as his body. "Stevick had died in a cataclysm of fire and mortar" (108).

The letters Warren sends home from the hospital in Yokohama after the cataclysm record this fragmentation of his mind. His early letters, "sunny" and "boyish" in tone (64), include references to himself in the third person. "Private Stevick hasn't eaten so well in a long, long time" (64). The use of the third person becomes routine in Warren's letters, and a "lightly mock[ing]" tone is added. The voice in the letters is depersonalized, detached, distant. Unimportant details are "scrupulously" listed (64). The handwriting the Stevicks' knew as their son's script changes. "By degrees it becom[es] stiff and slanting with long straight blunt l's, t's, j's" (65). As Warren's unconscious protects his mind from being overwhelmed, he becomes more "fragmentary and incoherent" (66). "Warren no longer acknowledge[s] [the family's] ... letters to him, never comment[s] on their news or trouble[s] to answer their questions" (67). Instead, he discusses how to kill a man most efficiently with guns, then enjoy the "sticking 'em as long as you want" with bayonets (68). This sensitive boy who grieved when the black boy on the bicycle died, now uses racial slurs such as "Chinks" and "gooks" to refer to the enemy.

What is left of Warren's mind is saved by his second injury at Imjun, as it ends his participation in the war. In Warren's near-death experience, he sees his

broken body as if from afar, and understands that the old Warren Stevick is dead. When he regains consciousness, he knows that the broken corpus in which he finds himself housed will be the incarnation of his new self (108). The trauma brings him to a pantheistic view of humankind. He now sees that "[o]ne flesh is all flesh" (108), and that this bond of people necessitates ending war, abolishing the weapons of war. "We must reduce human suffering on earth in the flesh! in our lifetimes!" (109), Warren tells the Catholic priest at his bedside. This conviction propels Warren into political activity when he returns from war.

On his return home, Warren is misunderstood by most of his family. Father Dominic dismisses his incarnation experience as mysticism or pantheism which he had "contracted" like a disease in the foreign environment. Lyle is unable to connect with the "urgency" of Warren's mission, instead trying to find similarities between his son's new convictions and his own beloved philosophies (109). Hannah can only absorb concrete details of her son's experience without becoming upset. Enid becomes Warren's only solace, "not only capable of understanding but interested in what he said" (110). When Enid is hospitalized, Warren is the only immediate family member to understand the significance of her attempted suicide. "Do you mean she tried to kill herself?" (145) Warren asks Geraldine in disbelief. When he goes to Enid's hospital bed he immediately understands that something traumatic has happened to push Enid to the precipice of death. Warren looks behind Enid's manicure and neat hairstyle and the plants and gifts that surround her to try to get at Enid's secret. "He asked her again had anything happened to her?"

anything at school? at home? ... are you in love, Enid?" (155). Enid deflects the conversation to a discussion of the Rosenberg supporters' clemency campaign. Citing the question of whether the Rosenbergs should be saved, or whether they in fact want to be saved, Enid talks in a subterranean way about whether she should live, whether she wants to live. And the usually clear-sighted Warren is temporarily blinded as to the real subject of their conversation. Warren falls in with the "anxious benign lies" (145) the family constructs as its explanation, and in this situation, chooses blindness with the rest of the family. Warren can see, but his physical and mental fragmentation in the war have undermined his power and effectiveness as a male in the family.

The Stevick family avoids hearing Warren's penetrating opinions. His suggestion of psychotherapy for Enid is vetoed by the family even though he explains to Lyle that trauma, such as a wartime experience, lodges in "the flesh as well as the spirit" (148). Warren, unable to help Enid, turns his attention to the political arena where he sees the need to combine idealism with pragmatism. To that end, he plunges into Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign, "the sphere of doing" (112). Warren is a freshman at Cornell University when he is first captivated by Adlai Stevenson's vision of leading the free world. Stevenson's voice impresses Warren as one of "immense practicality and wisdom [a]nd authority" (107). His mission, "leadership of the free world" (107), becomes the focal point for Warren's political activities in 1952. With Stevenson, Warren believes that the early fifties "might fix the pattern of civilization for many generations" (112). Set

beside such a lofty goal, the need for Warren to perform in school becomes obfuscated and he immerses himself in the campaign. When Stevenson loses in a landslide to Eisenhower, Warren is crushed. He realizes, too late, that "[t]he greatest American of his time [has been] . . . scornfully repudiated by his fellow citizens" (116), and that he has missed clues all along the way that such a thing would happen.

Having failed to save the country by putting Stevenson in the White House, Warren injudiciously turns his attention to saving an individual, Miriam Brancher. His involvement with Miriam begins when he rescues the drunk and morose artist's model from the rooftop of his rented apartment. Miriam is a woman of dubious reputation, and not, on the surface, a suitable match for Warren. She wears provocative clothing, and frequently brings home men at night. Warren is drawn to Miriam's overt sexuality and his rescuing her triggers a flashback to dawn at the Imjun River "waiting for enemy fire to begin" (293). The explosion he waits for when reliving the episode does not come, but his heart does explode in need when Miriam, in a rush of gratitude, spills the "story of her luckless life" to him (296). Miriam captivates Warren by telling him that she goes from man to man while pining to be with her severely limited son, Mikey, who lives with his grandmother.

Warren sees Miriam as "Rodin's Eve," "not the idea of a woman but the woman herself" (297). With Miriam ensconced in his room, Warren embraces the narrow single perspective of his digs. Unlike Warren's dead heroes Thoreau and Ghandi, Miriam's presence is palpably real to him. When he is with Miriam, Warren

becomes connected to his sexual needs. The relationship with Miriam makes Warren crave marriage and a normal middle-class lifestyle, but Miriam is unable to connect with Warren's need for permanence, and she eventually leaves him.

Warren never seems to get what he wants: he cannot win Miriam; he cannot make Stevenson President; he cannot get the U.S. to stop arming for war; he cannot get his father to refrain from building the bomb shelter; he cannot get Enid to reveal her secret. The key to Warren's failure is his inability to focus on himself as an individual. He spends his time doing things that need to be done rather than things he wants to do. Warren is unable to resist the pull of ideology because he replays his father's life script. Warren remembers Lyle's words about work. Work is "what goes against the grain of your soul but you've got to do it, you poor s.o.b., 'cause what's the alternative?" (343) Because his father's perspective is fixed, and Warren is unable to move past his father, Warren drops out of law school and goes to work in a poor Philadelphia neighbourhood for Children's Aid. Like Lyle, he cannot visualize himself as a success in socially prominent terms. Like his father, Warren takes on a job that will not challenge him intellectually. Warren has a chance early in the text to move beyond this point. He is decorated by the military for bravery in war, attends Colgate College, becomes an accomplished public speaker and political organizer. At the start of the text, Warren understands that philosophy must be combined with pragmatism to change anything in the world; at the close of Part III, he has abandoned his philosophy and taken a job that will not fulfill the vision he had for himself after his survival at

Imjun.

The Epilogue provides more information about Warren's inability to move beyond his father's fixation point. Here Warren is in another place, twenty-five miles south of Pueblo, Colorado, where his unnamed coalition is staging a protest against the "U.S. war mentality" by "blocking the construction site of the new Atlas Intercontinental ballistics base" (414). Before Warren even describes his mission in his letter to Enid, he says he has "no hope [she] will read of it" (414) in the press, as information is suppressed by the U.S. government. With no mention of why he left his job in Philadelphia or how his interest in political activism has been re-kindled, he tells Enid of the new direction his activism now takes. Words, according to Warren, "seem to have no effect," so he is opting for active obstruction, with the possibility of violence: "Kill us in order to build this missile site" (414). In the Epilogue, Warren sounds again like a dissociated soldier at war. He once again speaks of himself in a depersonalized manner as Captain Stevick. He remains, at the end of the text, both physically and mentally fragmented.

Warren needs the adrenalin of a war situation in much the same way as Felix needs to have the illusion of a boxing match. Both characters are fighting themselves. They are proving they are alive by engaging in action. For both, the illusion of conflict releases them into action. Both try to get a response so that they can justifiably attack their opponent. Warren's mission and Felix's opponent become receptacles for their intense anger. Both characters have symbolically died in action: Warren at Imjun, Felix at the fight he purposely lost at the request

of his mafia supporters. Warren loses his chance for a normal life because of his injuries in the war; Felix loses the chance for a career and fame in the boxing world. Both characters seek solace in women: Felix abusively in Enid, Warren ineffectively in Miriam. Both Warren and Felix are addicted to the adrenalin rush, the complex of feelings that cuts them off from their true selves. Each time a complex is triggered, it blocks them from real change. In the end, Warren and Felix both keep their old fixation points and cannot move forward.

In *You Must Remember This*, Oates maintains her keenest focus on the dynamics of dissociation in her depiction of Enid and Felix. For Enid, fragmenting is a means of coping with trauma. It allows her to protect the talented young girl who will be able to escape Port Oriskany, New York and the abusive relationship with her uncle. In the end, music saves Enid. Early in the text, she slips away through the music in her head. Music lessons keep her dominant personality functioning while the abuse by her uncle is ongoing. Music gets her away from home and to university. It is sound, like the vibrations of voices, which keeps Enid intact. The idea of dissociation carries with it the image of unimaginable suffering of a victim forced to separate from himself or herself to survive. Oates's diction makes this idea emblematic in the text through the image of the small bird set ablaze in a vacant lot by young boys. The image of the bird appears in and links the Prologue's description of Enid preparing to die and the abortion scene in the "Shelter" section.

Dissociation is the brain's mechanism for survival in extreme situations. It is

necessary for Enid to dissociate during her sexual assaults by Felix. Each time he rapes her, Enid becomes like the image of the "mourning dove" (5) which first appeared in Section One, "The Green Island." When Felix rapes her, she becomes the burning bird she remembers from childhood, the bird set on fire by boys in her neighbourhood vacant lot. Like the bird, Enid rises each time she is traumatized and dissociates: at the Villa Rideau, in Felix's apartment, in Felix's car. She becomes separate from herself - the mourning dove shrieking, dying.

Felix, too, needs to dissociate to block out what he does to Enid. His sense of isolation is so intense and his need for connection so acute that he can only comprehend that he has broken an essential taboo against incest after the emotional storm which triggers his complex of feelings and emotional associations has quieted. This occurs *after* intercourse with Enid. Felix needs to block out his failure in life, and alcohol is the drug he uses to dissociate himself from the appalling things he is doing to his brother's favourite daughter. Felix has failed professionally in a sport which defines by its nature male aggression. Failure is "the story of Felix Stevick's life" (366), and Felix expresses his feelings of failure through unrelenting rage. He channels his anger into boxing. When this is no longer possible, he channels his rage into Enid's body and soul. That she survives Felix's rage and is able to move on is the redemptive message in Oates's text. Dissociation saves Enid until she can face her pain and move away from her obsessive interaction with Felix.

Oates examines many levels of fragmenting and dissociating in *You Must*

*Remember This.* She does not view the brain's activity as a horrifying thing, but as a rescuing action to prevent complete destruction of the person. The fissures, splits, cracks and fragments of the dissociative process as it occurs in fiction fit compatibly with the idea that this text, set in Port Oriskany, New York, is Oates's version of paradise after the Fall. There are cracks in Felix's defenses, gaps in Enid's consciousness, fractures in Lyle's family relationships. The crevices in the Stevick family dynamics, the fissures and dissociations in Enid's, Felix's and Lyle's minds are manifestations of their flawed humanity, and proof that there is a *way in* for readers to understand the characters' motivations, and a *way out* for each of the characters to reconfigure their thinking. The idea of fractures, crevices, fissures is played out all through the text against the Brobdingnagian challenges Lyle faces in recovering his self-esteem, the mammoth task Enid confronts in finding a way out of Port Oriskany, New York, the Herculean undertaking Felix embarks on in trying to establish himself as part of the Stevick family. The cracks in the psychological functioning of Enid, Felix and Lyle produce an intense "zigzag"<sup>18</sup> experience, as thoughts move rapidly back and forth between opposing positions in a single character's brain.

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<sup>18</sup>I first noted the idea of the zigzag in American literature while reading Edgar Allen Poe's story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." In the story, a small crack or fissure, "once barely discernible" (Heath 1346) in the structure of the House of Usher, widens, becoming a crooked line "extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction to the base" (Heath 1346). The result, in Poe's story, is the collapse and fragmentation of the house which lets in the "wild light [of] the blood red moon" (Heath 1357). Poe's story shows an old form collapsing, letting in the light of something new. In Oates's text, the cracks and fragmentations in her characters' minds produce an intense zigzagging movement, which sheds light on their personalities. When the House of Usher fragments and collapses, Poe records "a sound like the voice of a thousand waters" (Heath 1357). In Oates, the voices, while not so numerous as Poe describes in his text, bring the same "fierce breath" (Heath 1357) of new understanding, as Oates examines the mind in *media res*.

Giving readers full access to the workings of the brain is a tradition most notably begun by Edgar Allen Poe, who, according to Goldhurst, "authorized fuller access to dreams, fantasies, and unconscious impulses than had been thought viable by previous artists." (1325). In Poe's story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," a whirlwind destroying the cracked edifice leaves readers wondering if the whirlwind can bring change as well as destruction. In Oates's novel, winds of change from the Korean War, the McCarthy hearings, the destructive capability of the atomic bomb all portend disaster, yet the fact that the fragmented characters search for meaning, connection and belonging, indicate possibilities for a new life. In Oates's text, complexes of associations with emotional affects trigger dissociative and fragmenting changes.<sup>19</sup> For Enid, feelings and associations around sex and death are the point of fragmentation. For Felix, a feeling relating to being excluded triggers his power complex. For Lyle, situations that publicly reveal the inferiority he feels trigger his fragmentation. For Warren, only the re-creation of a war situation allows him to feel whole, effective and powerful. The brilliance of Oates's presentation of the fragmented mind is that it simultaneously shows characters' weaknesses and their capacity for change. The ability of Oates's characters to dissociate or fragment engages the reader in a myriad of conflicts

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<sup>19</sup> Dr. Charles Brenner, in his 1991 article, "A Psychoanalytic Perspective On Depression," describes affects this way:

Affects are best defined as a combination of two elements: a sensation or experience of pleasure or unpleasure, and an idea or ideas. What constitutes an affect as a psychological phenomenon is the combination of the two of pleasure/unpleasure and ideas. It should be noted that either the ideas or the pleasure/unpleasure sensation may be unconscious as well as conscious (26).

while the narrative is moving forward. Readers have to withhold judgement on a character as the dissociative process destabilizes preconceived notions of culpability. In establishing the importance of cracks and fissures in the text, Oates takes the reader into a new, intricate and exciting landscape in fiction - the dynamics of the dissociative process.

## Chapter Two

### *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart: Alcoholism and the Dissociated Self*

*And Something's odd -within -  
That person that I was -  
And this One - do not feel the same  
Could it be madness - this? - Emily Dickinson*

In *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*,<sup>20</sup> published in 1990, Oates uses the dynamics of alcoholism and addiction to lay bare the horrific legacy of racism in the United States. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. praised Oates's text for "rendering the lineaments of racial resentment with precision."<sup>21</sup> Oates achieves

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<sup>20</sup> In subsequent citations *Because It Is Bitter, Because It Is My Heart*, will be referred to as *Because It Is Bitter*. The title of the book comes from Stephen Crane's poem, "The Black Riders," and is taken from *The Complete Poems of Stephen Crane*, edited by Joseph Katz. The poem, according to Oates's biographer, Greg Johnson, "had haunted Joyce since she'd first encountered it in a college anthology" (Johnson 358). Early in the poem, Crane describes a scene in the desert where he sees an unidentified creature:

In the dessert  
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,  
Who, squatting upon the ground,  
Held his heart in his hands,  
And ate of it.  
I said: "Is it good, friend?"  
"It is bitter - bitter," he answered:  
But I like it  
Because it is bitter,  
And because it is my heart.

<sup>21</sup>Dr. Gates draws important attention here to the racial divide in The United States. The idea of dissociation plays out in the de facto segregation of the races in this text.

this precision by locating her character's<sup>21</sup> "autonomous narratives beneath the threshold of consciousness ...[by illuminating the].. truths and actions which exist and occur apart from [the characters'] volition" (*Because It Is Bitter* 184). She studies the effects of aspects of dissociative behaviour on her text's characters.<sup>22</sup> As in other of Oates's novels written during this period, a traumatic event triggers such profound emotional response that the characters automatically repress, refashion, forget or obliterate memories that will prevent them from fully functioning in their own worlds. The consequence of such repression is fragmentation, which results in what Oates calls "(t)he dreaming self beneath the thinking I" (184). The division of surface from self, at its most benign, prevents characters from full engagement in life; at its most damaging, it destroys those who do not integrate their intuitive and emotional selves with their rational selves.

Oates divides *Because It Is Bitter* into four parts: Body, Torsion, Ceremony, and Epilogue. "Body" opens with the murder of Red Garlock, an act which both implicates and links the white character, Iris Courtney, and the black character, Merlyn (Jinx) Fairchild.<sup>23</sup> The victim, Red Garlock, is an abused, street-

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<sup>21</sup>Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Murder She Wrote." *The Nation* (July 2, 1990):27-29. Cited by Johnson, p.358.

<sup>22</sup>Coons, in his article "The Differential Diagnosis of Possession States," calls dissociation a "defense mechanism which is usually reserved to help individuals cope with overwhelming trauma," and names some abnormal forms of dissociation which are called dissociative disorders and which include depersonalization disorder, psychogenic amnesia, psychogenic fugue...and multiple personality disorder [M.P.D.] (214).

<sup>23</sup> In *Invisible Writer*, Greg Johnson notes that Oates, in a letter to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., states that the character of Jinx was based on her memory of a fellow student, Roosevelt Chatham. In the letter, Joyce refers to Chatham as a "black boy of my distant past, whom I knew in that glancing yet somehow closeup/magnified/even intimate way we know classmates in seventh or eighth

wise teenager, prone to exhibitionism, who preys on vulnerable women. He follows females, crooning crude sexual remarks, sometimes urinating in full view of them. Hammond people say that "Little Red Garlock got the way he is, mean and crazy-cunning, by being knocked upside the head one too many times by his daddy Vernon Garlock" (95). Red's father is an alcoholic given to violent rages; his mother has been driven insane by her husband's abusive treatment of her. When Red's mother, Vesta, is pregnant with him, she has a vision of her deceased red-haired grandfather, a soldier who was killed in Normandy. She names her baby Patrick Wesley after him. Little Patrick, or Red, bears no resemblance to the dignified forebear in whose honour he has been named. At age six, the child is still constantly dirty, "a patina like the grime of years covering him" (96); he continually smears feces on the wall. Vesta suffers a breakdown. She attempts to "force him into boiling water" (98),<sup>24</sup> but the six year old runs away, surviving for three days on his own. When he returns, "naked and battered and sick-looking in the doorway" (98), his father castigates him for breaking his mother's heart. In fact, Vesta's heart was broken long ago by her abusive husband; now it is her mind that is permanently damaged. The family's deprived background and its dislocation from its southern roots result in a cycle of ignorance and poverty passed down

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grade....across whatever familial and social abysses" (Johnson 358).

<sup>24</sup>Vesa's derangement is echoed later in the text when Persia Courtney, delusional from alcohol abuse, attempts to boil her cat, Houdini, because she is convinced he is going to smother her.

from generation to generation.

Dynamics of dissociation and fragmentation form the axis on which *Because It Is Bitter* turns. Beginning with the Garlock family, Oates traces how alcoholism pervades and influences the family lives of the Garlocks, the Fairchilds and the Courtneys; how the disease and its destructive ripple effect crosses colour and economic barriers and destroys lives. The Courtneys and the Fairchilds, unable to realize the American dream of comfort and respectability, turn to alcohol to anaesthetize their pain.

When the body of Red Garlock is discovered in “Body,” Section One of the novel, the focal characters, Iris and Jinx, who are responsible for the murder, have already distanced themselves from the event by using defenses characteristic of dissociation. In order to protect their lives in Hammond, both of them repress all visible traces of emotion; both of them block out some memories of Red's murder. It is necessary that they repress aspects of the event in order to continue functioning. For the duration of the text, Iris and Jinx each must live with what David Spiegel refers to as “less than one personality.” According to Spiegel,<sup>25</sup> dissociation after a trauma results in a failure to integrate “various aspects of identity, memory, and consciousness. The problem is not having more than one personality; it is having less than one personality” (Hacking 18).

In Oates's text, Iris and Jinx, as the result of the traumatic incident with

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<sup>25</sup> Spiegel is quoted by Ian Hacking in *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*.

Red, never become fully-integrated personalities. The narrative demonstrates how the long-term effects of their dissociative response to the murder seriously damage their futures. Both Iris and Jinx are likely candidates to dissociate.<sup>26</sup> Iris has already developed the capacity to stand outside situations emotionally because she lives with alcoholic parents. Her ability to dissociate, then, has its roots in her home life. She appears to be self-sufficient when she is still a child because her parents' co-dependent relationship leaves her out of the family unit. She is frequently left alone when Duke and Persia go out together to drink and dance as the "Incomparable Courtneys," or to bet at the horse races. Iris has her first dissociative-type episode on the night of Red's murder, when, as a young teenager, she dons her mother's shimmering raincoat and goes to Cheney's store in the black section of town. Iris ostensibly wants to buy cigarettes "like an adult woman" (99) but, in truth, she wants to see Jinx Fairchild.

The lyrics of the Platters' 1950s song, "The Great Pretender," filter through her head, "Oh yes I'm the great pretender - lonely but no one can tell." These lyrics have widespread impact on the text. The idea of a pretender suggests false

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<sup>26</sup>Because both Iris and Jinx are highly intelligent and sensitive individuals, they may be more likely to be highly suggestible to dissociation (my conclusion). Suggestibility is a common characteristic in people who can dissociate easily. Both Iris and Jinx are presented by Oates as characters who, under normal circumstances, would not murder another person. That one has murdered, and one has been an accessory to murder is reason enough for immediate and full repression of the event through fragmentation or dissociation.

The repression of Red's murder corresponds to what Dr. B.P.Jones, in her 1993 article in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* calls "automatized suppression." "The first begins with active, conscious suppression of [or refusal to think about] the objectionable content, feeling or wish; however, with repeated acts of conscious suppression, the exclusion of the material from consciousness becomes automatized" (Bower, 1990; Erdelyi, 1990), (Jones 88).

surfaces, fragmentation, hidden meanings, con games. Oates frequently mentions the song in the text when she is describing the duplicity and lies in alcoholic behaviour. Here the game does not involve alcohol but the actions of a white teenager, Iris, who idolizes black people because she likes Jinx Fairchild. Because Iris unquestioningly idolizes Jinx, she puts herself in danger by going alone at night.<sup>30</sup> With Persia's coat on and the Platters' song repeating in her head, the "rhythms, primitive and hypnotic" (100), Iris relinquishes her will. Here Oates clearly demonstrates a fragment of Iris's personality taking over: her head feels like a radio gone wrong; "the static starts, every station blasting at once"; "her head is buzzing," (100) as she separates from her normal personality and seeks out Jinx to flirt with. When she locates him, Iris lets his melodic, honeyed voice sweep over her. She feels outside time when she is in Jinx's presence and when she is at Cheney's store. When another white girl at the store compliments Iris on her coat, Iris "neither recognizes the coat nor knows what the girl has asked"(106). It is "as if sound and sense have cracked apart" (105) for Iris. She is not in one piece.

Jinx's sports training has perfected his automatic physical responses. He has been taught to separate the motions of his body from his thoughts; he can react more quickly than he can think. His first dissociative event occurs on the same night that Iris arrives at Cheney's in her<sup>27</sup>mother's raincoat. It is not Iris, however, who triggers Jinx's dissociation, but the threat a white hillbilly poses to his

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<sup>27</sup>The Great Pretender" song also has relevance to fragmentation of the personality through alcohol in the actions of Persia, Duke, Jinx and Minnie in the text.

masculinity. As a man, Jinx is "outraged" when he hears that Red Garlock has been following Iris. He is incensed by what might happen to Iris at Red's hands if she walks home alone. When Iris suggests calling the police, Jinx's temper flares. His emotions completely block out his capacity to reason.

Jinx feels infuriated with Iris for a number of reasons. Iris does not understand that "cops" are never "asked" to come to lower town, as the discriminatory practices of the police would likely level more punishment on the black residents who request help. In Jinx's neighbourhood, a white woman with a black man is cause in itself for trouble with the police. Convention is that black men "settle things themselves" (111). Jinx takes Iris's suggestion that he phone the police as implying that she thinks he is a coward. The complex of feelings he has around his masculinity is triggered.<sup>28</sup> A change of voice signals the beginning of Jinx's dissociative event. He fragments, reacting instantly, speaking in an uneducated, heavily-accented voice. "I ain't afraid. I ain't no helpless girl," he says angrily (111). Later that same night, when Jinx and Red engage in a one-on-one fight, Jinx dissociates and "slams concrete on [Red's] back" (16).

Oates uses pointed third-person narration here to indicate how separate Jinx is from his rational self:

there's something in *his* hand ... something his fingers close upon in

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<sup>28</sup>Roger Brook, in his article, "Psychic Complexity and Human Existence: A Phenomenological Approach," in *The Journal of Analytical Psychology*, states that both Riklin and Jung saw that "disturbances in conscious attention could be clustered around particular issues loaded with affect". This is precisely the case with Jinx and the threat to his masculinity. Both Freud and Jung, according to Brooke, found themselves confronted with the reality of a consciousness that is embodied and a body that has intentions of its own (507).

desperation... he's bringing it down in desperation on Little Red's head ... again and again, again...his breath in a whistling sob (116).

Jinx remains outside the actions of his body as he kills, and remains fragmented *after* he kills Garlock. The only way he can continue to function in his daily life is to think of his hands as a separate entity. "Everywhere he goes ... he's carrying these hands of his" (127). He imagines each hand being something "with its own thoughts and its own unknowable consciousness of *him*" (127). "[H]e is confronted with the reality of a consciousness that is embodied and a body that has intentions of its own" (Brooks 507). He "steals glances" (127) at these hands as if they are new. The hands are no longer a part of Jinx. "[His] hands killed" (127), not him.

Oates emphasizes categorically that Jinx is dissociated at the time of Red's murder. "Yes, it's true. Jinx Fairchild's brain didn't know what his hands intended ... Somehow he'd been a party to smashing" (128) Red's head, but after the blows - "he doesn't remember" (128). Soon the murder will become "little more than a story Jinx [has] heard, in fragments," (160) but its profound impact will remain. After killing Red, Jinx remembers burning his sweatshirt at the dump and trying to remove bloodstains from his jeans and hands. However, he only remembers these things "like flashes of dream ... he doesn't remember the person who links them, can't call back any continuous Jinx Fairchild except to know it's him and was him all along" (129). His "thinking self" cannot account for the enraged actions of the "dreaming black self" (184) of Jinx Fairchild. When the police come "he's smooth as honey," but when he thinks of Iris "his mind [still] blanks out" (137).

The mournful blues classic, "St. James Infirmary," and Jinx's reaction to its melody and words, epitomize his dilemma with the white girl Iris. This classic blues song, written by Joe Primrose, tells the story of a man going down to the St. James Infirmary only to find his lover lying dead on a mortuary table; his grieving response to his loss is to drink and make plans for his own funeral. The song demonstrates how pivotal the woman is to the man. In *Because It Is Bitter*, the death which occurs is that of a third person. However, as a result of that death, both Jinx and Iris become fixation points for one another. Iris feels compelled to be physically near Jinx, and she frequently invents excuses to do so. Since the murder Jinx also feels compelled to "locate her, fix her in place" (182) before basketball games. The compulsion to anchor one another is partly an obsessive way to deal with the guilt over Red's death, and partly a practical manoeuver to protect the silence they wordlessly have agreed upon in this matter. Jinx knows that while he was killing Red, Iris remained "transfixed" (116), neither interfering nor going for help. In his rage, he believes that sweet little Iris has a cold and angry underside, one which calls for blood. Oates's narrator presents him as imagining Iris's wish as the command: "Jinx, don't let him live" (116). Jinx's projections of his thoughts onto Iris are not an accurate portrayal of how she is feeling, however. All Iris's emotion is held in suspension as she watches Red Garlock die. While the event is horrific, it is the first time in Iris's life that she has been so fully protected, so Jinx's act of murdering another human being overwhelms her. She becomes fragmented.

It is not a case of Iris not having a response but of her response being repressed.<sup>29</sup> In the months after Red's death, she experiences an absence of feeling. "The numbness that settled on [her] hasn't lifted entirely; it's as if she moves, still, in a suspension of being, a *giant's withheld breath*" (155 italics mine). Her white skin comes to represent the fading of her spirit, an "unspeakable not-there-ness" (155). Gradually, she begins to feel that she, not Jinx, is responsible for the murder. She does not understand what life course she has set in motion for Jinx.

Iris's feeling capacities are not operating normally now, but her capacity to think remains keen. Iris invents a lie for the police when Red's body is dredged up. She claims that she has heard that Red is in trouble with a motorcycle gang. The story takes root and flowers. After a few months, these bikers are confidently referred to in the community as Red's killers, and the matter appears settled. Iris's thinking self is tough enough, and detached enough, to appreciate the "extraordinary power of duplicity given a seemingly artless utterance at just the right time and just the right place" (156). She understands that "there is little distinction made between victim and criminal" (156); she understands that "remorse cannot be extracted" from her (157). Iris transmutes her guilt into a "stone of uncommon beauty" (157) and is able, with the exception of her extreme

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<sup>29</sup>In repression, according to LaPlanche and Pontalis in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, "the repressing agency (the ego), the operation itself and its outcome are all unconscious. Suppression, on the other hand, is seen as a conscious mechanism working on the level of that 'second censorship' which Freud places between the conscious and the preconscious; suppression involves an exclusion from the field of consciousness, not a translation from one system (the pre-conscious-conscious) to another (the unconscious)" (439).

compulsion to be connected to Jinx and all things black, to block out the incident. But blocking out the murder of Red Garlock, combined with the damage Iris's alcoholic parents have done her, keeps her heart hardened as she goes through her young life. No energy flows from her head to her heart, and no emotion moves upward to temper her rational decisions. The young woman survives by keeping events and people separate. Fragmenting allows Iris to escape a life ruled by alcoholism and poverty even after Red's murder but prevents her "dreaming I" from surfacing (184).

For Jinx Fairchild, emerging whole from his initial dissociation during Red's murder is a far more difficult matter. Because Jinx is black, the stakes for him are very high. He is the hope of the black community in Hammond, New York. Everything in his future rides on his athletic ability. The road out of the respectable, but poor, black neighbourhood in which he has been raised is steeper than the road Iris will be obliged to climb, simply because of his colour. Coming from a home with a caring mother will, ironically, hurt Jinx, because he has not developed the same kind of protective layer around his heart that Iris has formed around hers. Even though Jinx committed the murder in self-defense, his guilt works on him in a variety of ways. He loses interest in school; he can neither sleep nor eat. He has a recurring dream of Little Red Garlock's face, "soft and white as bread dough ... and the legs [coming] alive suddenly ...; the dead boy [having] hold of him and pulling him into the river" (175). Jinx's dream is really a premonition. The murder he commits in rageful response to Red's attack will pull him, at the end

of the text, to an almost certain death in Vietnam.

Once Jinx has killed Red, the only place he feels safe is on the basketball court. There he can forget what he has done; there he can believe that some day he will be able to "break free" (166) of Hammond, and surmount the burden of his colour. After the murder, he begins to practice basketball - alone and with great intensity -- after school, after dinner. College scouts see his constant practice as a "sign of a sure professional" (171). They believe that Jinx has the potential to be a great credit to his race, "a star who's willing to be a team player" (172). Jinx, however, notices that discrimination is practiced in Hammond, where there are never more than four Negroes on any Hammond sports team. Sometimes he feels "angry enough to tear out somebody's throat with his teeth" (173). At times like these, he steps "into his own secret space" (173) on the court, outside time, where the scouts will not see his rage, where he can neither fail nor commit another terrible act. At these times - on the court, outside time - Jinx's persona of the "Iceman" effectively cuts off all his feelings of guilt and fear. He is able simply to respond to the game, to be successful.

Jinx does make efforts to confess the murder to his mother, Minnie, but these attempts are met with her frightened refusal to acknowledge what her son is saying. His confession to his father, an alcoholic who hides from family involvement, fails to make Jinx feel absolved. The powerless Woodrow Fairchild Sr. is mute because his vocal cords have been crushed in the army by his white comrades. He takes refuge at the bottom of the garden to pray, tend the garden,

and nurse his wounds with alcohol. When Jinx tries to ease his conscience by confessing to his father, his father's eyes shrink with the fear of hearing a truth he cannot bear. Cut off from being absolved by either his father or his mother, Jinx is overly influenced by his brother Woodrow Jr., (nicknamed Sugar Baby), who says that all Jinx's sports efforts will make him no more than "a performin' monkey" (192) for white men. If Jinx fails to perform, Sugar Baby says, "you on your ass" (192). Jinx is deflated by his brother's remark and devastated when his brother's suggests that Jinx purposely lose a playoff game to benefit Sugar Baby's racket connections. He feels himself shattering like crushed ice. There is nothing but low self-esteem under his "Iceman " persona. Jinx does not have the willpower to reject his brother's request. He tapes his ankles carelessly, falls, and "throws" the basketball quarter-final as his brother has requested. He simultaneously quashes any chance he has for a successful professional life outside Hammond.

In *Because It Is Bitter*, Oates paints a chilling picture of the gulf between blacks and whites, and the odds against blacks succeeding in America in the late fifties and early sixties. The situation in the United States is a true split or dissociation on a country-wide scale. From the beginning of the text, Oates makes clear that a person's value, dead or alive, is assigned according to colour. The first question asked as Red Garlock's body is dragged from the Cassadaga River is "White, or colored? The dead man." Death is more important when the body is white. Below the railroad yard, six Negroes "stand contemplating the scene ... but don't come any closer," because to do so would be to risk suspicion of murder.

When Red's body is dredged up later in the day, the blacks who are watching remain apart from the whites, "on the far side of the river" (11). It is by no slip of the pen that Oates presents the black population of the town as cut off from the white. Their physical separation reflects the split in American society in the 1950s.

Racism permeates Hammond, just as fear of miscegenation permeated Faulkner's fictional land, Yoknapatawpha. Information about "difference" in people of colour is everywhere in Hammond. As a child, Iris is drawn to blacks and aware of distinctions being made about colour. Iris is told that "the-race-as-a-whole can't be trusted" (23), that bloodlines are everything (26). *Keeping the country white* (italics mine) is the mayor's motto. Clearly, fear of miscegenation runs as deeply in Hammond as it does in the south, even though Hammond, New York is just about as far as one can get from Faulkner's old south. It is "a place of Ice Age terrain, saw-notched ridges, [and] hills as steep as attic steps" (3), but it is also, like Faulkner's old south, a place where a person can die simply because he or she is black.

Oates includes the story of a black citizen of Hammond, John Elmore Ritchie, who was permanently injured physically and psychologically in World War II. Ritchie is stopped and beaten because the police have a report that a "stone-blind drunk nigger ... wearing dark sunglasses" (28) has attacked the hood of a white woman's car somewhere in the city. Police view Elmore's war-incurred limp and the dark colour of his skin as suspicious enough to qualify him as a perfect match for the attacker. Because Elmore remains silent, the police conclude that he

is "resisting" them. In fact, he is silent because he is trying to control his rage. When Elmore finally does lash out, and "butts with his head" (30), the police kick him to death, then claim he died in jail. Oates adds this vignette to highlight the extent to which Hammond, a small representative American town, practices deeply entrenched racism.

The gap Oates perceives between the white and black experience in America is a theme she continually thrusts to the forefront. When Persia takes a mulatto lover, Vergil Starling, Oates uses the mixed-race affair to give a second example of the discriminatory practices of Hammond police officers. Vergil's car is pulled over by the police. Oates's narrator carefully delineates the difference in Vergil's and Persia's responses to the incident. Both of them have been drinking. Vergil, however, immediately becomes hysterical, while Persia nonchalantly comments, "You haven't done anything wrong" (162). His reply to Persia encapsulates the dilemma faced by blacks. Vergil says, "No matter what I done or didn't do, *it's who I am*," (162). The voice Persia uses with the police is full of outrage, even though her attractiveness has been permanently eroded by alcoholism, even though she is wearing a tattered fake fur coat and out-of-date shoes, even though she sports dried-out, over-dyed hair. Vergil does not have a similarly outraged voice to use. As the police call him "boy," "nigger," "coon," (163) he becomes "ashy faced" (163), meek, hunched. He is humiliated in front of the same woman he so recently and confidently cooked for and wooed in the privacy of her apartment. At the roadside scene, Persia ignores what Oates's

narrator suggests the policemen are seeing: "a white woman - fucking a nigger...a white cunt" (164). When Persia arrives home, however, she vents the fear and rage she has just experienced while lying in Iris's arms. Reversing the mother-child roles, she rambles on to her daughter in "drunken-sounding despair" (165).

Iris, as acutely observant as her name implies, has been fascinated by black people since she was a young child. At an early age, she wonders about how black blood differs from white blood. She hears people comment on Negroes' big lips and their wooly hair. She observes the division between black and white on the bus in Hammond. She cannot understand why a black mother and child cannot sit next to her and her mother when there is extra space at the front of the bus. On Sundays as a young child, Iris sees black people going to church. She is drawn to "the gorgeous colors of the women, their hats, dresses, like peonies, big luscious plump-hearted flowers ... and the pretty little girls ... like dolls" (22). To Iris, the rich shininess of their skin is beauty to be drunk in, "these skins like cocoa ... milk chocolate ... bittersweet chocolate"; a dark purplish sheen like the sheen of fat concord grapes" (23). Iris's parents maintain a sense of superiority to blacks, even though their reversals of fortune constantly bring them closer to the "fogs and mists" (3) of lower town, where the black community lives. They pride themselves in not saying derogatory words like "nigger," "coon," "spade," "spook," "shine," (24) yet Duke maintains, in a discussion with his brother Leslie, that blacks "have put themselves in that category" (25) of slaves.

Only Iris and her Uncle Leslie are not racists. Leslie, an artist and a

photographer, sees with his camera. His "cavelike" (24) photography shop in a mixed-race neighbourhood proudly displays white faces beside black ones. Leslie takes a moral stand on the racial situation. He considers racial and ethnic slurs "an insult" (24) to all; he believes that slavery "is the great abomination" (25) of our time, and that the chain of prejudice and bigotry must be broken. Duke dismisses his brother Leslie as a "poor bastard [who] identifies with them ... niggers" (25). Just as Leslie's photographic compositions are studies in the opposition between dark and illuminated spaces, the novel as a whole uncovers the reality of black cultural dissociation. In the text, dark spaces correspond to the dark faces of people who live in the bowels of lower town; the "illuminated spaces" are comprised of moneyed people like the Savage family and figures like Duke and Persia Courtney, Iris's parents, who are "reflectors," people with no light of their own to contribute. Duke and Persia brilliantly reflect surfaces, like actors on a stage set which technically presents the "sunny side of the street" (89) in an otherwise dark theater. Oates deepens her references to the chasm between white and black, poor and wealthy people, by inserting phrases from the 1930 song, of the same name. The sunny side is the place where all Americans want to be economically. The irony in *Because It Is Bitter* is that only one character, Leslie, gets onto the sunny side of the street. The Fields-McHugh song posits simple but impossible solutions for depressive incidents in adult life. Oates's text repeatedly refers to the song to mock its veracity. Persia hums it to block out the need to drink or vomit after drinking; Duke covers his pain with drinking, gambling and

womanizing, not with "the sun in his heart," as the lyrics state. In Hammond, New York, a happy exterior cannot make you as rich as Rockefeller; it cannot compensate for poverty.

The luminous Persia Courtney's first extended appearance in the text is in a beautifully crafted vignette which allows the readers to contrast her with the abused mad woman, Vesta Garlock. The two appear to be opposites, but Vesta's condition foreshadows Persia's future demise through alcoholism. The Persia-Vesta scene is built on Vesta's fear of "Negras," people whom she thinks have "animal ways, the mark of Satan on their foreheads." She believes that a "Nigra" is following her, and grabs Persia's wrist with her grimy claw-like hand as she passes her in the street. In Hammond, Vesta is "known to be sickly and erratic in her behavior," "not right in her head" (6-7). Vesta is so deranged that she cannot be counted on even to correctly identify the body of her murdered son. She has been beaten by her alcoholic husband so often that she wanders the streets of Hammond daily, "a vacant-eyed worn-out woman of forty" (8) who sleeps in garages, back yards, public washrooms. Persia is helpful, but unsympathetic to Vesta as she leads the woman home to "protect" her from the Negro she imagines is following her. To Persia, in her "polka-dot silk dress, her spike-heeled black pumps ... her gorgeous red blond hair" (15), people like Vesta Garlock "bring it all on themselves" (14).

When Persia enters the Garlock household, however, her disgusted response to it is visible. Vesta notices Persia's reaction to the poverty and stink of

her home, and shouts angrily that Persia is too young and pretty to judge her. "You can't know," she yells. The presence of a Garlock baby sleeping peacefully in the filth and smell of the shanty surroundings stirs Persia's heart, distracting her from her initial shock. Vesta has what Persia wants - another baby to love her unconditionally. If Persia were to have another child, however, she believes she would risk losing Duke, a chance she cannot take emotionally. Oates's narrator shows Persia's intense emotional needs when she presents her yearning for another baby. She denied herself another child because of her stronger, linked needs for alcohol and Duke. Her breasts might sag from nursing and she would not be able to "go out drinking with him, share his good times with him ... God, how Persia and Duke need their good times!"(20). The narrator informs the reader how long Persia has been struggling with alcohol by inserting a picture of a young, drunk Persia, bathing baby Iris after partying, trying not to slur her words when speaking to the child(27). Persia's need for the "good times" drinking, for being the centre of Duke's attention, foreshadow what will destroy her - seeking relief for loneliness in the temporary dissociation caused by alcoholism. Oates places Vesta and Persia at close quarters to establish the dissociative-like behaviours of alcoholism used throughout the text. Oates will show Persia at the end of her life becoming another Vesta Garlock.

Persia's role in *Because It Is Bitter* is remarkably complex. Oates portrays her as a woman who wants nothing more than to receive unconditional love. This unfulfilled desire first results in her having a baby when she is seventeen. Because

she needs income and is uneducated and single, the beautiful Persia embarks on a number of jobs which highlight her prismatic qualities. In a spotlight she can, like Blanche in Tennessee Williams's play, "*A Streetcar Named Desire*," glow with reflected light from sources around her. Alone, Persia's light is extinguished, and she is consumed by the terrifying feeling that she is unraveling. This motif of unraveling, which Oates's narrator uses to portray Persia, is significant in a number of ways. Persia is not on solid ground emotionally. She has no firmly established sense of herself so she reverts to doing what she does best - pleasing men. Duke, however, is a gambler first and a lover second. When Persia becomes aware that she cannot be her husband's sole focus, she feels abandoned and turns to alcohol to prevent her feelings of anger from penetrating her protective emotional shell of romantic fantasies. Liquor is the link between the needy Persia and her con-man, alcoholic husband whose "narrow-bridged nose is already becoming swollen and venous" (44). Even when Persia severs her marital ties with Duke, she remains psychologically attached to him until she dies. This attachment to Duke, her diminished circumstances, and her progressively more degrading jobs destroy Persia completely. On her deathbed, Persia warns Iris not to make the same mistakes she has in her married life: "[D]on't turn away from goodness if you can find it," she says, referring to Uncle Leslie who has always loved her (260). For Persia it is too late. She is so emotionally tangled with Duke that she cannot reject him, even at the end of her life. "I knew what your father was ... didn't care, I loved him so ... I don't care now I guess ... It's too late now" (260).

Oates's narrator presents Persia's disintegration through alcohol realistically. Frequent bouts of drinking make Persia unable to eat. Her need for alcohol increases and she begins to have blackouts. Her jobs become less respectable as she becomes sicker. When liquor use finally begins to destroy her brain, Persia starts hallucinating. She is unable to work. From wanting to dissociate from the emotional pain of not having Duke's complete attention, she becomes sick to death. At the start of *Because It Is Bitter*, Persia has a responsible job at Lambert's Tea Room (16) where she can clothe her attractive body to advantage in a silk dress and high heels. Persia's next job, as a salesgirl at Freeman Brothers, "the largest, best department store in Hammond" (32), does not forestall a move down to a "cramped, low-ceilinged apartment" on Holland Street. There "the earth begins to shift on its axis" for both Persia and Iris (40). Duke is now frequently "drunk sick from losing" (40) marathon poker games. The shabby apartment reeks of Duke's "alcoholic, headachy, rancid" sleep. Persia becomes a waitress. She frequently stumbles home drunk after work accompanied by other men. But if her husband is still out, she goes back out to look for him. Duke always has the power to cajole her out of her anger by persuading her to "join him in a drink" (45), even when he confesses to a large gambling debt. Persia knows Duke is lying about the amount he owes, yet she willingly lets herself get crushed by his needs.

Persia's downhill journey can be seen in her changed habits. She now does things she once would have considered loathsome and tawdry. She dresses more

provocatively. Her grooming slides. A lit cigarette now dangles from her mouth. She has a "new laugh" which Iris recognizes as meaning "hurt, anger, befuddlement" (53); she becomes confused and forgetful. By 1958, depicted in chapter eight of the "Torsion Section," Persia is working as a hostess at a low-class club, the Golden Slipper Lounge (202). She listens to the Everly Brothers' song, "All I Have To Do Is Dream," to shore up her courage to go to work. Her hair "has a harsh, synthetic sheen, like a mannequin's" (203). She wears a

black satin dress, that demeaning costume, short tight skirt, scoop neck... Worn with smoky spangled stockings and three-inch heels, the dress is as provocative as a burlesque costume (203-204).

Along with Persia's escalating alcohol use and her ever-diminishing circumstances, Oates's narrator writes three pages of brilliantly fragmented argument between Persia and Duke (87-90). The fight bounces between Duke's jealous contention that Persia is showing off her "fancy silk tits" at her job and Persia's accusation that Duke is constantly lying about the extent of his gambling debts. The couple begin with accusations and end with more drinks and sex. Their drunken hilarity at the end of their fights forms a stark contrast to the picture Oates draws of young Iris, who crouches in front of the slanted window in her room while they argue, trying to see the moon, and begging God to let her be good (86). Being good, in Iris's mind, equals not feeling disgusted by and "icy-hearted" (86) towards her parents. In this case, she cannot be good because remaining icy-hearted and emotionally distant from her parents allows her to remain separate from the dysfunction in her family. She views her parents as

animals trapped in a "zoo enclosure" (91). Their relationship is like "a match struck recklessly close to flammable fabric" (91). Duke is "getting rough" (91) with Persia now "threatening to strike her, maybe giving her an open-handed slap, shoving her back against a door frame"(91).

Oates entitles Part Two of *Because It Is Bitter*, "Torsion." The word aptly describes the dynamic of this section of the text. When torsion is achieved, one part of a body remains fixed while the other part twists. The energy produced by torsion is present in the relationship between Persia and Iris. Iris is a fixed point in the text. Her addicted, co-dependent parents turn around her. This section of the novel shows how Persia's and Duke's ideas and dreams are twisted by alcohol and gambling addictions, while their daughter remains fixed on academic goals that will remove her from their dysfunctional world. The contrast between their blindness and Iris's ability to see consequences clearly is startling. Even when Iris fixates on being in contact with Jinx, there is always the motive of escape present. Iris is able to move on despite her connection to Jinx. Persia remains fixated on the idea that if she can just please men, everything will be all right. As she persists in her romantic beliefs, she loses her dignity, beauty and respectability. The effects of alcohol abuse twist Persia's once exotic, luminous beauty into a grotesque parody of her original elegance and charm. The "Torsion" section of the text specifically targets Persia's increasing dissociation through alcoholism. When Persia has an affair with Vergil, she is already having alcoholic symptoms: "unsteady fingers," nausea and "trouble keeping food down" (145). "Don't wait up" becomes a

euphemism for Persia's being out drinking, trying to get male attention. In chapter eight of "Torsion," Iris views her mother with "despairing satisfaction" (203). "My beautiful mother. No longer beautiful" (203), Iris thinks with angry satisfaction. Persia now drinks before work, although she promises Iris she will not. Seeing this, Iris protects herself by further repressing her feelings. What is left in Iris is a "cold inquisitiveness, an analytical curiosity" (206), her thinking I.

In chapter ten of "Torsion," Iris admits her mother's condition by writing in her journal: "she's an alcoholic." The words are "committed to the authority of ink on paper" (212) as her mother vomits in the next room. It is a pattern now for Persia: late arrival home, stumbling into the bathroom and vomiting. Iris copes by recording in a journal stories about her own life which she now views as being "in eclipse" (213) because of her mother's illness. Persia now hides bottles everywhere and has become extremely forgetful. She angrily lashes out at her daughter when Iris brings up her drinking patterns. She claims she uses alcohol because of the demeaning type of job she has. At the Golden Slipper, Persia is frequently manhandled by the customers. "I deserve some happiness," Persia says, excusing her need to drink and distance herself from her feelings about herself and her life. To Iris, Persia has now become "a force of nature" (214), frequently storming through the cramped rooms of their home in alcohol-induced rages. As Persia's illness escalates, Iris retreats (215). Now her mother has numb fingers, takes more drink breaks; she has the sensation of "trying to keep ahead of something she hopes won't happen," (216) singing "Blue skies smiling at me" to

ward off the vomiting and dizziness. Persia can no longer keep food down and she is becoming paranoid (218). She thinks people are staring at her swollen belly and whispering "filthy things to her she can't quite hear." What Oates reveals in Persia's interior monologue in chapter twelve is that all her drinking is to ward off the loneliness she thought she would never experience again after giving birth to Iris.

Persia has her first public collapse in Corvino's Bar and Grill, and the owner, calling her a "stupid cunt" (223), sends her home. New symptoms of dizziness, disorientation and constant lying attest to the progression of Persia's alcoholism. Persia now becomes a prostitute while carrying on the fiction that she is working in a hosiery shop. When Iris sees her mother entering a bar with an unknown man, she asks vindictively: "Does he pay you Momma? In cash or just in drinks?" (250). Because she has been betrayed by her mother so many times, the cuticle around Iris's heart only hardens more. Persia still believes she's pleasing men, even "if they hurt her" (250). Pleasure now equals pain for Persia. Soon she begins to hallucinate about red ants crawling in her pubic hair and underarms. When she walks to the bathroom she "sees" glass bits all over the floor. Persia begins to feel that Houdini, the ever-hungry cat, intends to "suck away her breath" (253). Persia has become like Red Garlock's mother, trying to boil the cat as Vesta had once tried to boil Little Red. Just before she dies, Persia exacts a promise from Iris that she will not be like her. After the funeral, Iris "rarely speaks of Persia's death and never voluntarily thinks of it" (269). Iris's power to suppress

and dissociate from her feelings prevents her from grieving after Persia's death.

Oates shows the pattern of Minnie Fairchild's dissociative use of alcohol by portraying the changes she undergoes after losing her position when her white boss, Doctor O'Shaunessey dies. Losing Dr. O'Shaughnessy is "the heart-break of Minnie's life" (178). Even the small legacy he left her is being contested by his children. Minnie Fairchild first turns to alcohol when she loses the status of having rich white patients talk to her about their personal ailments. Her status in the black community has been elevated for years by this respectable job with a white doctor. During that time she would mine happenings in the office for stories to share with her neighbours. Once the alcoholic doctor dies, however, Minnie, as Oates's narrator has implied all along by the use of the diminutive name, becomes very small socially. She is not a real nurse, so she works first as a maid at the prestigious Franklin Hotel, and then, as her submerged, angry self begins to surface, in a succession of private homes. The narrator describes the change in Minnie as a separation of the "I" she usually presented to the world, from the "self" that lies just below the surface. Her chattering, Oates says, is "like rancid milk beneath a creamy film" (177). The formerly positive, no-nonsense woman, now "heavy hipped" (177) from her depression over her failed marriage and the fate of her sons, "complains nonstop like it's a sermon" (177). At the bus stop she now sees herself as "huddled with [her] kind of cattle, gone mute and mindless with misery" (177).

The self that is poking through Minnie's once positive personality is

described by the novel's narrator as "something sickly trying to push through" (179). Minnie is unaware that it is she whose outlook has changed. She blames integration of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas for making things worse for blacks; she blames Martin Luther King for his "preaching 'non-violence' and 'passive resistance'. I ain't returning any hate with love cuz I ain't got any love to spare," she now cries (180). Minnie's angry voice has a distinctly different tone; "[H]er accent goes south, all the way to Northeast Georgia" (180), the narrator says. When her eldest son, Woodrow Jr. (Sugar Baby), is skinned alive, utter despair sets in for Minnie. The old "Minnie Talk" is gone. Her speech used to be full of upbeat sayings like:

You have to know where you've come from to  
know how far you've come (132).

Coloured crybabyin' about they skin don't  
get no sympathy from me (132).

Minnie relinquishes her position as the strong, black matriarch of her family, and becomes a vacant-eyed, complaining, television-watching welfare recipient, dressed in tent-like dresses to hide the defeat she now carries as weight.

Alcohol addiction is the manifestation of a dissociative process in Persia and Duke Courtney as well as in Minnie Fairchild. Each of these characters is unable to deal with emotions that surface when life's harsh realities become overwhelming. Persia's fear of not being loved enough compels her to retreat into an alcohol dream world, where an air of romance, sexuality, and idealized beauty continually though fictitiously revolve around her. Through alcohol, Persia can

continue to deny, until the moment immediately before her death, that her life has gone terribly, terribly wrong. Duke uses alcohol to distance himself from the guilt he feels about needing to gamble more than he needs to love Persia. Duke has created an impossible illusion around his coupling with Persia. With her, he must always be one of the "incomparable Courtneys," always perfect, always whirling in the spotlight. Alcohol provides the means of blotting out the pain he is causing Persia as he pursues his other fixation, gambling, and new women who, not yet knowing him, will still idealize him.

Minnie Fairchild's descent into alcoholism has a pathos about it that shakes Oates's text. Here is a woman who has faced life straight on, refusing to feel sorry for herself, her failed marital situation, her second-class citizenship in white America. A powerful and endearing matriarch at the beginning of the text, Minnie is determined to hold her head up high and raise her children to be empowered citizens. When Jinx tries to confess Red's murder to her, however, cracks appear in her psychological makeup. The first clue is that she refuses to hear what Jinx is telling her, as if not knowing will obliterate the fact of the event. The second indication that her psychological world is a brittle one comes when her first-born son, Sugar Baby, becomes involved with the underworld and she looks away, even though his expensive clothing, car, his money and shady companions suggest she should do otherwise. Sugar Baby betrays his brother Jinx by seducing him into purposely losing a championship basketball game, and ultimately, his professional career. When Jinx folds in on himself by missing a shot and crushes his ankle,

Minnie's longing for permanent respectability is destroyed. The final blow, and one which leaves no doubt as to the direction in which Minnie's life is going, comes with Sugar Baby's violent and degrading murder. It is at this point that Minnie's defenses against bitterness and anger dissolve completely. By dissociating through alcohol, Minnie becomes, like her husband, one of the walking dead. Minnie's tragedy in the text carries enormous power because it brings with it the narrator's indictment of white America's attitude towards black Americans. One wrong step taken, one accident befalling a black person, and the path veers unswervingly downwards. There is a determinism in the narrator's handling of the Fairchild family that is reminiscent of Theodore Dreiser's naturalism in *An American Tragedy* or *Sister Carrie*, but it is race, not economic force that is the primary determinant. By contrast, Persia's demise through alcoholism does not prevent Iris from moving beyond the dysfunction of her family and at least moving upward socially and economically. Oates may be presenting two families in the text to show readers how difficult it is for black Americans to succeed when economic adversity, family patterns of alcoholism and community prejudice are present.

Alcohol-induced dissociation plays a part in Jinx's failure to break free. Jinx first turns to alcohol after intentionally botching the semi-finals basketball game. Distraught by what he has done, he begins drinking and partying. Alcohol triggers Jinx's need for sex as a release for disappointment, frustration, hatred and love. He is mesmerized by a highly sexual woman, Sissy, who is an irresponsible and alcoholic single mother and drug user. The union results in her bearing Jinx two

children. The crushed basketball opportunity, the pass-fail low-class diploma he is granted after the accident, and the two small children he now has to support further destroy Jinx's chances for material stability. When his brother, Sugar Baby, is brutally murdered, Jinx's spirit is nearly broken.

Other characters in the text with alcohol problems turn to the drug when there is a matter they cannot face. Woodrow Fairchild Sr. becomes alcoholic after he is fired for allegedly sexually abusing a white child at the school at which he works. Woodrow has no voice with which to protect himself. He is invisible and mute in the text for two reasons: because his vocal cords have been damaged in the War by white soldiers and because he has no status in society. Even Duke's brother, Leslie, drinks excessively for a while to dull the pain of Persia's rejecting him as a lover. When Persia is seriously ill from alcoholism, however, Leslie makes and keeps a promise not to drink until she is better. Ironically, the fact that Persia dies keeps him sober.

Duke too is an alcoholic, but his ability as a con man and his dedication to getting wealthy through horses keep him from sliding downward the way Persia does. He is always brimming with ideas and visions of himself in wealthy settings, and can smell a pay-off in the next bet, the next race, the next card game. Duke always has a girlfriend with money, a new vision, a new angle. While he is immersed in his activities, Duke fully believes that he will be successful. When he loses, no one is more surprised than he. Duke bounces back from every defeat quickly with a new and better idea. His grandiosity protects him from feeling

despair. Drinking fuels Duke's vision and loosens his tongue. When he tells Iris that he is bringing his heart to her, Oates notes that he is actually thinking of dice and ice. When he wants to dupe Persia, he does so effortlessly.

Duke does not, however, completely overwhelm Iris's capacity to think in his presence. This is evident when he arrives at the hospital to see his deathly ill ex-wife, who is in the final stages of her alcoholic decline. Iris, "her lips numb," shuts out her father's pleas to see the woman he says he loved. Iris regards Duke as the person who has "crushed [her mother] in [his] moist fist" (46). She shuts down emotionally in her dealings with him. Showing that Iris's feelings and thoughts are dissociated, Oates puts Iris's voice in italics: "*I walked past him. I don't know him. By the time I got to the sixth floor I'd forgotten all about him*" (263).

In Part Three of the text, "Ceremony," Oates examines Iris's move to Syracuse, New York, and her re-invention of herself with the Savage family. Iris believes that by leaving Hammond, she is breaking the link to her parents, to the memory of Jinx and Red Garlock. As a university student, she enters a new world, one she believes will allow her to reinvent herself. But the fragments of her old life push through, even when she is within the Savage family's world. Oates demonstrates that Iris is still fragmented by switching back and forth between the voice Iris speaks aloud with, and the voice that expresses her dreaming self. Oates shows this switching clearly in a finely wrought Thanksgiving dinner scene Iris shares with her fine arts professor, Dr. Savage, and his family. Iris, eager to

please, listens with concentration, but simultaneously drifts into a "hazy erotic trance" (292) about the one time she was in Jinx Fairchild's arms (244). The narrator makes it clear that Iris is still fragmented: on the one hand she is the eager guest, thinking, "How is it possible that I am here? That 'I' am here?" (290); on the other hand, Iris's dreaming self expresses the cynicism she internalized from her father, Duke. She wonders how these people could possibly think that the issues they debate so passionately have any "profound, lasting significance ... were in fact expressions of political power" (291). And finally, the voice of her heart, set by Oates in italics, dismisses the whole dinner scene by reverting to what she would like to tell Jinx - "*I love you. I would die for you. You are the only real thing in my life*" (291).

Later during the same dinner scene, Iris's steely front shows signs of crumbling when she refashions her mother's death from "a long illness" (295) for the Savages. The discrepancy between her words and the truth quickens her breathing, and her eyes fill with tears. Minutes later, Iris vomits up the anger, anguish and desperation she feels about Persia's death. When Gwendolyn Savage comforts her with soothing words about God's plan, another fragment pushes through - that of the cynical Duke Courtney, for whom "Talk of God ... is fancy jargon for 'what's the odds?'" (297). That voice, stifled by Iris, wants to laugh at Gwendolyn Savage for being so gullible. Changes from one personality fragment to another conclude with a "violent attack of shivering." The next morning, the narrator notes, Iris only recalls these changes "*in vague watery patches like any*

of [her] *dreams*" (297).

Sometimes Iris is aware of the self beneath the I in her interactions with the Savages. When invited to dinner or a social event at their house, "Iris always accepts with gratitude" (307). Immediately after hanging up she thinks, "Why am I doing this? I'm never comfortable with these people" (307). When Gwendolyn Savage inquires about Persia Courtney's religious beliefs and is assured by Iris that Persia "seemed to believe," Mrs. Savage's reply, "Oh, then that's enough!" (305) triggers a hard, sardonic inner voice in Iris saying, "Really. Is it enough? And 'enough' for what, entry into your smug Christian heaven?" (308).

The narrator indicates by the use of voice, frequently in italics, the continuing division between Iris's thinking self and her "dreaming I" (184). This is evident in her interactions with Alan Savage when he questions her. She replies as expected, then immediately questions her "lie" in another voice. On another occasion, a personality fragment pokes through the surface when Alan Savage makes a distinction between a Botticelli face like Iris's, which he perceives as a work of art, and women's bodies in works of art which he perceives as "their incongruous fleshy bodies" (336). Iris realizes that Alan dislikes women. Her eyes brim with tears; then abruptly a harsh laugh escapes her mouth. At this moment "headlights illuminate her contorted face" (336). A dissociative fragment has taken over for a brief moment, and almost ruined things for the sweet, intelligent, innocent Iris who plans to become a Savage of Syracuse. When Alan phones the following day to ask for another chance with her, the narrator shows, again in

italics, Iris mocking her split self: "How happy, HOW HAPPY I AM. *You didn't think, did you, that I COULD BE SO HAPPY*" (337). The thinking "I" here is mocking the "dreaming self."

Iris is aware of her own doubleness when she reinvents her parents for Alan Savage. Sometimes Alan even notices her different voices, one like a "melodic southern accent," the other full of the "harsher nasal sounds of upstate New York" (338). When Iris tells the seamless story of her parents, only her "damp eyes" betray any opposing feelings. "[H]er voice is poised and unhesitating as if what she tells him is true, *or contiguous with truth*" (338 italics mine). Iris's "thinking I" wants only a "consistent, seamless" story to present to the Savages. In her journal, Iris shows consciousness of this behaviour - she quotes the surrealist artist Man Ray whom Alan favours: "The tricks of today become the truths of tomorrow" (339).<sup>30</sup> Iris *is* conscious of reinventing her past, but she remains fragmented.

With regard to Iris's relationship to Jinx, "remnants of her old life protrude into her new life, like shrapnel fragments working their way through flesh" (278).

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<sup>30</sup>Man Ray was an American artist who lived in Paris in the early 1920s, becoming intensely involved with both the Dada and Surrealist movements, and many members of the "lost generation." In addition to creating surrealist paintings and objects of art from mixed media, he was also known for inventing the "photogram... an image made from placing objects directly onto light-sensitive photographic paper" (Siepmann 815).

One night she defends her memory of Jinx by taking up a knife to protect herself against the "bitter, disturbed black man (276), Claude St. Germaine, who lives in her student housing. Iris's "thinking I" takes over here. She is dispassionate, steady: she holds a carving knife to the black man's throat and calmly threatens to kill him. "You mistook me for someone else, didn't you - someone I'm not. Don't ever do that again," she says (277). She gets a "feverish" excitement after this event that presages one of her "migraine attacks" (278) and dissociative-like episodes where the "dreaming I" surfaces. Iris, half-dressed, rushes out to phone Jinx in the middle of the night. She gets his number from Information, lets it slide out of her memory, and stands, bareheaded and defeated at the unused phone in the bleak winter cold as the thinking part of herself returns to take control. Oates puts the "thinking I" here in italics: *"Of course I didn't call. I never would. He'd think I was insane. It's impossible"* (279).

Iris's next dissociative event occurs in the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination. Because of the killing, time seems to stop for the American nation. The national mourning which follows allows her time to descend to her emotional roots. It is raining, and the descent is long and steep, like entering an "undersea world miles from the university on lower ground" (376). Here, away from the elitism of the university, she feels that she can breathe again. Entering a "tunnel-like underpass below a railroad embankment," (377) Iris crosses into the ramshackle black neighborhood. As she wanders in the area, she has a sense that "[t]ime has turned soft" (378). She dissociates. Shards of the underside of her old

life begin to surface. She thinks she is in Hammond; she feels as if she is trying to find Jinx for comfort.

Oates's narrator shows the reader two voices surfacing within Iris during the time she spends in this neighbourhood: one confident that Jinx had wanted her in their single sexual encounter in his car; the other adamant that "it was only his body, between his legs. Not him" (377). This pragmatic voice surfaces again when she begins to feel guilty about Jinx murdering Red. "He never meant to kill," she says, "it was my fault" (378). Being in the black neighborhood allows her to mourn the gulf that separates her from Jinx, the only person in her life who protected her, and therefore loved her. Iris yearns to belong to the "warm-lit interiors in the neighborhood of ramshackle house" (377) she passes. Feeling faint from exhaustion and the chaotic feelings of fragmentation, Iris enters a café. Ensnared in its shabby confines, overwhelmed by the smells of barbeque and hair oil, Iris gets relief: in the decrepit washroom she urinates in an intense stream that feels like ridding herself of poison; she buys food and eats with unusual appetite. Iris is not rejected by the other black customers; she is comforted by the presence of people who remind her of Jinx and a place that reminds her of Hammond. When the black waitress, Mandy, cries for the fatherless Kennedy children, "How's she gonna tell those children what a cruel thing happened to their daddy out in plain daylight" (380-81), Iris assumes that blacks and whites have been united by the tragedy.

The Shirelles' 1961 recording of the popular song "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" is playing in the café. Oates's narrator uses the song as an effective

question and backdrop for the temporary union of blacks and whites in shared grief after the assassination of President Kennedy. "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" tells the story of a woman who questions the meaning of a shared sexual experience:

Tonight the light of love is in your eyes  
 Will you still love me tomorrow?  
 Is this a lasting treasure?  
 Or just a moment's pleasure?

The narrator of the text uses the Shirelles' words to comment ironically on the fleeting picture of racial harmony she has just depicted in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination. The picture of Iris feeling comforted and protected inside the cafe abruptly shifts to the dangerous situation she confronts when she goes outside. By being female and alone in an all-black neighbourhood at night, Iris has violated a boundary and becomes easy prey. She is in a dissociative state, unaware of the shift in her personality. In addition, she has believed for hours that she is in Hammond. Even her gait is different. She now affects a "slightly swaying walk and her loose arms suggest she's drunk or drugged" (381), while her eyes "are fully open, bright, intelligent" (381). Iris moves "like a dreamer in a charmed landscape" (382) until a car, full of black teens, noting the swaying white girl, blocks her way. They drag her into their car and assault her. Iris is "sprawled helplessly ... as their hands grab her breasts, sticking their fingers into her, into her crotch" (382). Iris, jolted back to the thinking part of herself by the traumatic attack, screams, fights, sobs. When she cannot fend them off any longer, however, she dissociates: "her consciousness detaches itself from her struggling body,

*floating* and *suspended voiceless* (italics mine) above it as if she has already died" (382). Here full dissociation saves her from total psychological destruction. Iris simply shuts down. The trauma is sealed off in an encapsulated fragment; it cannot destroy her rational self. Time may have turned "soft" (378) when Iris first entered the neighbourhood, but the traumatic attack that ends the section brings both Iris and the reader back into real time.

This brutal assault which triggers Iris's dissociative event renders her as mute as Woodrow Fairchild, Sr. After she is released from hospital, neither she nor members of the Savage family mention or even allude to her "accident" on the day of Kennedy's assassination. Sexual assault lies outside the Savage constellation. Bruises from kicks to Iris's belly and blows between her legs are healed; the chipped tooth is flawlessly restored at the Savage family's expense. There has been no actual vaginal penetration, so in the eyes of the Savage family, their flawless reputation cannot be sullied by this unfortunate incident. No one in the Savage family asks why such things happen, although Alan's response, at the time of the accident, appears loving and distressed.

The Epilogue of the novel deals with the alterations to the heirloom dress Iris will wear at the wedding. The dress has a skirt like a parachute, which will safely bring Iris into the Savage's class; the bodice is so tight that she will not be able to breathe naturally. The dress and ring are symbols of her new owners, the Savages. But they also represent the kind of gifts Iris's deprived and unloved mother longed for - the material of the heirloom dress and the glitter of the family

ring reflect surfaces to advantage. These material things are prisms, empty in themselves, just like Persia, but they reflect light in a dazzling way. To Iris, the dress is merely a superficial costume. The ring, however, is important to her. It is proof that she has escaped Hammond.

Alan Savage and Iris Courtney are a well-matched couple. Alan and Iris will be united in their shared desire to erase their pasts. Iris needs to obliterate memories of Red's murder and her highly dysfunctional and poor family; Alan needs to cover up his homosexuality. Iris records her thoughts in her journal. "I must learn to forget; I am learning to forget. I live in the present tense and have never been so happy" (404). Her notations in her journal, however, do not obliterate the memory of the stream of invectives hurled at her by the black men who attacked her. "The body she knows is hers," (404) and it still holds memories of being assaulted and called "white cunt, Bitch." Iris believes that she can erase these voices. In the final scene, Iris changes her underclothes and tries on, for a final time, her entire wedding "costume" for Mrs. Savage and the dressmaker. She poses this question to them: "Do you think I'll look the part?" (405). Later Iris will receive a photograph of Jinx through her uncle Leslie which asks a similar question. The photo shows Jinx dressed in a U.S. Army uniform, his posture unnaturally rigid. On the back Jinx has written "Honey, Think I'll pass?" (403). The text concludes with Iris echoing Jinx's question. She asks Mrs. Savage: "*Do you think I'll look the part?* [405]. These statements underline the narrator's view that there is a split inherent in being human - and that there will always be the

surface and the underneath - the "thinking I" and the "dreaming self" [184].

Music plays an important part in the encoding of *Because It Is Bitter*.

Fragments of songs are strategically placed in the text to form an ironic backdrop against which Oates can explore the realities she sees in the America of the 1950s and 1960s. Like advertisements selling America as the material promised land, many of the songs insist that everything is all right, that a simple switch of attitude will bring blue skies and love. Only two songs Oates uses in the text allude to trouble in paradise: "The Great Pretender," and "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" The songs show Oates taking a strong stand on the dissociation she sees in America as a whole - a country that can insist that everything is all right when the truth is otherwise. Characters, like Persia, who destroy themselves, do so while still believing the lie of these songs. There are no "Blue Skies" shining on Jinx, on Persia, on Minnie, on Sugar Baby. Songs, like alcohol, are cheap courage for those who refuse to think, or for those who have no hope. "Dream, Dream, Dream," says the Everly Brothers' song, "All I Have To Do Is Dream." But the dreams are really nightmares, and there is no easy way out.

The songs from the 1920s to the 1950s used in *Because It's Bitter* form an effective counterpoint to the dissociative theme of the text. "Blue Skies," the 1927 Irving Berlin hit, epitomizes the dream of happiness achieved through unexpected good luck. The lyrics in the opening verse: "[G]ood luck came a-knocking at my door, Skies were gray, but they're not gray anymore," is a constant encouragement for a gambler like Duke. The chorus in the second section of "Blue Skies" aptly

describes Persia, whose vulnerability lies in her belief that there will be "nothing but blue skies" and love in her future. The emphasis on love in these background songs makes the listener wary, especially when they are placed in counterpoint to Persia who actually dies for love. Lyrics from the Platters' song, "The Great Pretender," have a wide application in the text. A line from the song states: "My need is such I pretend too much." This line is an apt description of Persia, Iris, Duke, even Jinx. Unconscious pretending is just another way for Oates's narrator to speak of the dissociative nature of American life. Even the idea of pretense suggests layers in personality, which is exactly what the narrative theme of the "thinking I" and the "dreaming self" suggests. The novel explores pretense, both conscious and unconscious, in dissociative behaviour.

Every major character in the Courtney and the Fairchild families, with the possible exception of the artist Leslie, presents a surface which is calculated - the "thinking I," and the hidden layer, which, for a variety of reasons the character wishes to conceal. Duke is the king of pretense in the text. Persia becomes the victim of her own pretenses because she lacks the manipulative skill and grandiose visions of her husband. Iris too is a "Great Pretender". She chooses to pretend to escape Hammond by moving to Syracuse and entering the academic life; she maintains a sweet, shy profile to escape being noticed in the investigation of Red's murder. With the exception of her obsessive attachment to Jinx, Iris pretends to have no feelings. The second verse of "The Great Pretender" shows Iris's situation clearly:

Oh yes, I'm the great pretender  
 Adrift in a world of my own  
 I play the game, but to my real shame  
 You've left me to dream all alone

Iris has to live a double life from the moment she has Red Garlock's blood on her hands. On the surface, her roles as the good student and the icy-hearted daughter provides a cover for her vulnerability to Jinx, since he is the only one who has seen her hard heart. In this way, Iris resembles her father, Duke. Iris is betting that Jinx will win. She is spellbound because, like an avid gambler, she has a lot riding on the outcome - her sexual integrity, her honour. At the University of Syracuse, with the Savages, with Alan, with other suitors, Iris buries her other side. Only Jinx, in her view, can love her, because only Jinx knows who Iris is.

Jinx joins the army. He will have to pretend that success equals working for "The Man,"<sup>31</sup> rather than playing college and professional basketball where he could fully express his talent. The fact that he takes the same military route his father took, the fact that he realizes that most whites see him as a category rather than as an individual, the fact that his anger must be suppressed in the presence of whites, will silence him as literally as his father was silenced by having his vocal cords crushed. Jinx will be like his father, one part of himself asleep, "snoring rhythmically," the other part capable of violence, his anger like "wasps in a giant hive." (363) Jinx must be a pretender to live, or even to die, with the appearance of

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<sup>31</sup>This phrase "working for The Man" means working in a subservient position for a white boss. It brings the memory of the power structure of slavery into the novel.

dignity. As a black man, Jinx has always understood the need to pretend in the white world, the need to present a version of himself acceptable to the white middle-class: polite, smart, talented, humble. When Jinx's life takes an irreversible downward turn at the end of high school, Jinx continues to look for a way to pretend that his life is, at least on the surface, satisfactory. When, near the end of the text, Jinx leaves the picture of himself in military attire for Iris with the words, "Think I'll pass?" written on the back, he confirms that he understands he is a pretender.

Iris's fiancé Alan is homosexual. He will have to create a fictitious sexual identity to survive life as a married man. "The facts of his life must be indirectly assembled," Oates states (339). It is clear, even when he is engaged, that Alan intends to keep himself distant from Iris by visiting Europe frequently after his marriage to continue his sexual life there. Furthermore, the narrator indicates that this will be successfully done because Iris "isn't the sort of person to ask direct questions" (339). Alan will completely deny his past, but only publicly. Marriage to Iris will be a cover for him. All these characters are pretenders. As "The Great Pretender" lyrics say, they "seem to be what [they're] not, you see."

Uncle Leslie is neither dissociated nor fragmented. He is the only Courtney who does not offer a surface which is different from his real self. He suffers ridicule and swift dismissal by many for his openness; instead he uses his energy for art rather than for concealing his heart. At the conclusion of the text, Leslie, drawn by the Vermeer appearance of a building on the sunny side of the street, moves his

shop. At the end of the novel, Leslie is as "rich as Rockefeller." He is the only person Iris trusts (391); "he is no longer in debt, [and he] sleeps and works better" (400); he has some friends. Leslie has gained stature by honestly pursuing his goals. He did not give up on his artistic vision of constellations of faces of mixed races, crowded together, repeated, harmonious, not even when no one believed in him.

There are solutions at the end of *Because It Is Bitter*, but no comfortable resolutions. The narrator tells readers that in future years Alan will call Iris cold-hearted, indicating that the cuticle formed earlier around Iris's heart will never be penetrated during her marriage. Jinx Fairchild will save himself from permanent menial jobs in Hammond by joining the U.S. army, but Iris knows Jinx's life, like his father's, is essentially over. "[I]t wasn't tears she beat back but a sensation of the starkest horror, a certitude beyond grief" (403). The cycle of being sacrificed to "The Man" will not end with Jinx Fairchild's generation. His value to The White Man is skill-specific, and when he shattered his ankle, he shattered his life and became disposable fodder for the Vietnam War. Even Jinx's mother does not have the strength to disprove Sugar Baby's statement to Jinx that, as a black man, he is nothing more than a "performin' monkey." The "open drainage ditch" (51) that separated Jinx's and Iris's houses when she moved to Holland Street remains an impassable gulf at the end of the text.

Although Iris will be safe financially and socially with the Savages, the narrator indicates that she will be smothered by the small world she has entered.

To maintain the fiction she has created with the Savages, Iris will consciously have to deny her "dreaming self" and therefore deny the seat of her emotions. By moving up socially, and moving out of Hammond, Iris consciously fulfills her promise to her mother that she will not be like her. She loses the chance, however, to integrate the split-off part of her personality. The legacy of alcoholism for Iris is a permanently fractured self. In spite of this social and financial security, she will be unable to be intimate because her heart remains unreachable, even after she grieves her mother's death. Iris will maintain the wary, cynical attitudes she has learned from her father. Iris will, like Jinx, "look the part" (405). She will pass, but her "dreaming self" will never join her "thinking I." This tragedy of permanent fragmentation occurs in a parallel way in both Jinx and Minnie Fairchild. Jinx can only get out of Hammond by joining the army - a step the narrator notes will both give him temporary dignity and kill him. As a soldier fighting for his country he will be accorded value. Jinx's likely death, however, will elevate him in the eyes of the Hammond citizenry. Jinx will never be whole again while he is alive. Minnie Fairchild's only hope of regaining her dreaming self and changing the surface representation of her life will, ironically, be found in the pride she will have in her son being a soldier and dying for his country. If, like his father, Jinx is merely injured, he risks becoming another burden for the once strong woman.

Given the information Oates has proffered in the text, Iris will fare the best. She is white, intelligent, calculating and thinking. She has endured so much in her dysfunctional family that she will successfully, albeit not happily, do without a

dreaming self. Iris will never mistake the parachute-skirted wedding dress she wears for her marriage to Alan Savage as a symbol of intimate union. The marriage certificate will be proof, however, that she has the legal and social right to protection, something she profoundly lacked in her alcoholic family. The Savages will use her to protect their name in a homophobic environment, but they will not be able to fool her about their son. Iris becomes like her father, a master at the con game. She bets that living in the protected world of art and ideas will outstrip the web of talk and lies her parents have woven. That the only horse available to bet on is a Savage cannot deter her. Something is better than nothing, and the scepticism she brings to her marriage from her father, Duke, will protect her petrified core.

Oates uses the motif of the heart, the feeling I, to provide torsion for the text. In *Because It Is Bitter*, there is movement in the hearts of the characters while false surfaces remain in place. Oates indicates the changes going on beneath the surface by revealing fragments of the true personalities pushing through the pretensions. Even Iris's heart cannot always conceal her feelings. While Iris can make her heart icy to protect herself from further injury by her parents, her heart becomes a small, vulnerable, beating thing in the presence of Jinx, her protector. Just as Jinx can offer comfort to Iris's heart, she can offer his heart comfort by seeing him as a person, not a colour category. In the text, Persia is all heart: in the presence of a male she cannot think and she cannot protect herself except by cheerful denial that anything is amiss, and by using alcohol to anaesthetize her

bruised heart. Her con-man husband, Duke, has a heart that can only be touched if he loses a woman, a wager, a deal, or a wife. His cynical attitude isolates him from his heart. Duke's goals are money and pedigree, not intimacy, so his heart remains hardened. There is no evidence of growth in him. For Oates's narrator, the real Duke is only a surface. Persia, on the other hand, pained and pathetic though she may be in her losing battle with loneliness and alcohol, opens her heart to her daughter as she dies. She gives Iris permission to be different from her. Although Persia has been an inadequate mother, her heartfelt love does penetrate Iris's heart. Oates shows the effect of Persia's words years after she has died. Amidst the public outpouring of grief over Kennedy's assassination, Iris openly grieves the mother who loved her but could not nurture her. From the start, Iris sees Jinx's heart beneath his Iceman exterior. She becomes intimate with him by allowing him to see her icy heart. Jinx is protective and warm-hearted and for that he must die.

Oates's message remains chilling and multi-leveled. *Because It Is Bitter* is not so much about loving or relating as it is about surviving. In this novel, a person can survive a traumatic event, but it is unlikely that he or she will ever be fully intact again. The narrator frequently views solutions to life's problems as morally ambiguous. *Because It Is Bitter* has extreme complexity due to issues of race and family dysfunction. The heart in the text is more a symbol of vulnerability that carries the threat of destruction than it is a symbol of warmth. Innocence and warmth in this Oatesian world lead to harm, even though the characters strain towards those ideals like plants leaning towards light. Those who survive must

harden their hearts to protect themselves. Everyone must have a con game or an angle in order to survive. For people who have not experienced trauma or dealt with issues like racial discrimination, the story would be different, but once either is present, there is always fragmentation - the "surface I" and the "hidden I" remain unintegrated.

In *Because It Is Bitter* everyone, to varying degrees, is fragmented: Persia, Jinx, Iris, Duke, Minnie, Woodrow. Oates's narrator easily moves readers from the surface to the feelings closest to their hearts, all the while maintaining that these voices are all separate, and perhaps never will become fully integrated. The task of demonstrating the fragmentation of the human mind with such agility, the weaving of voices so closely together that the reader must examine from whom the words are coming, is an achievement of stunning proportions. In *Because It Is Bitter*, it is as if Oates's narrator has turned on a myriad of radio channels simultaneously, but instead of producing a hopeless jumble of sounds, is able to render each strand with perfect clarity.

## Chapter Three

### Part I

#### *I Lock My Door Upon Myself: Wrongful Elisions of Sex, Birth and Death*

*Vision translates into style; personality translates into voice; all art is or should be experimental if it is to be judged worthy of our attention.*  
(Oates, The Georgia Review 9)

Oates referred to her lyrical 1990 novella, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*,<sup>32</sup> as a "peculiar balladic tragedy" (Johnson 361). Her comment is modest for a piece of work that combines, with an air of effortlessness, the ethereal qualities of a painting by a master with rich subtexts about the artist's consuming need to create and a dialogue about depression, dissociation and suicide. The narrator of the text uses the idea of dissociation in two distinct ways: as a feature of severe depression and as a major structural event in the text. In the former, the character Calla Honeystone Freilicht has many reasons to become depressed. Her mother is dead; her father is a failure; her grandparents are unable to nurture her. Calla's depression stems from a deep sense of abandonment and feelings of deprivation. Adding to her depression, is the fact that she is decidedly different from the pragmatic folk in

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<sup>32</sup>The text, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, will be referred to from here on in the text as *I Lock My Door*.

the farming community around her. As a result she becomes the focus of ridicule, emotional abuse, and ostracization by the family into which she marries and by the community in which she lives.

Calla is a precocious child "quickly bored, thus feverish, mutinous" (*I Lock My Door* 8). In the one-room school house she strikes back at the teacher, Mrs. Vogel, with the same willow branch she uses to discipline the children. The motherless Calla grows up "willful, unpredictable; cunning as a half-domesticated creature" (7). Her father, Albert Honeystone, exudes an air of failure. His farm goes into bankruptcy because it is subject to "the manipulation of grain markets" (7). Albert is not savvy enough to keep the fertile acres of his remaining land, nor is he strong-willed enough to get through his days as a sawmill foreman without mash cider and homemade whiskey. Calla's grandparents also fail to exert a positive influence on their only grandchild. They are "dazed and embittered country people with their only conviction a sense of the world veering off at angles inhospitable to their interests" (8). Albert Honeystone's fear of his daughter's willfulness and silence, his conviction that Calla, with her hair the "color of orange poppies," (11) might not be his offspring, his worry that she might be retarded, push him to send her "to live with relatives of her dead mother's in the village of Shaheen" (11). There the young woman whom that community views as "touched in the head" (11) frequently leaves home to return to her father's foreclosed farm property, "drawn by an almost physical yearning" (13). At the farm, she sleeps on a dirty mattress and gorges herself on orchard fruit and raw vegetables. She lies in

her cobwebbed old bedroom,

hug[s] her knees and [gives] herself up not to sleep but to death....frightened of hearing murmurous voices and the rattling of the horse-drawn wagon that meant that they were coming for her coming to take her back home not to let her die here but to take her back home (24).

The relatives fear the "powerful stink as much earth as animal" (13) that Calla brings into their home. Concluding that her activities will "bring shame on [them] all" (14), they arrange a marriage to George Freilicht, "an ugly little doggy-eyed man" (19), who himself is pushed into the marriage by his relatives (16). In both her birth home and her marital situation Calla has no opportunity to express herself. Cut off from her true self, she falls into a depression. The change in her behaviour is read by her family and her community as more evidence of her savage nature and animal ways. But her lack of engagement with her children, her silence when she is among family members, her disappearances from her marital home, and her poor sanitation habits all demonstrate that Calla is truly suffering from depression.

[S]he scarcely cared how she dressed, even on Sundays; even when company came; like a female derelict sometimes forgetting to wash her hair from one week to the next so that its wavy-red luster turned opaque and there lifted from her a faint warm rank animal smell...Why for instance did Calla wear clothes already soiled?-stockings already frayed? her worst gloves, her shabbiest hat?... *And why was she so loathe to look in a mirror?*(31).

She has internalized the constant criticisms and the negligent and abusive treatment of her family and community. Calla's disengagement cannot be attributed to specifically artistic yearnings so much as the deep need to engage the world on her own terms, and the complete frustration of that need. Portraying the central

character through depression is another way for Oates to demonstrate ways in which the dissociative process works in ordinary lives, in conservative American communities, in dysfunctional American families.

Oates uses a number of dissociative events to structure her novella. Calla's relinquishment of her will to the water diviner, Tyrell, is the most salient of these. Calla's intense desire to merge with Tyrell is activated by the cluster of feelings she has around the water diviner. Her whole being is drawn to him. Consequences cease to matter when she is with him. To Calla, Tyrell represents the underground stream of her imagination that she has been unable to access in herself. Once Calla sees Tyrell, her capacity to reason becomes blocked. She becomes unable to make self-protective judgements. "And what he wanted to do with her, what he would expect of her as a woman, she would have no choice, she would have no will, except to acquiesce" (65). Calla is unthinking, "curled like a baby waiting to be born" (57) when she lies with Tyrell. Fifty years later, when she looks back on the passion she felt for Tyrell, she tells one of the narrators from her family: "*I was drawn by that man like water sucked by wind, shaping my shape to his*" (57).

Oates presents Tyrell Thompson, a part-time preacher, water diviner and con man, as an obvious trigger for Calla's dissociative behaviour. Oates invests the figure of Tyrell with many attributes that signify otherness. He is black in a white community, a preacher among farmers, an itinerant among people firmly rooted in their land. Oates's narrator describes Tyrell as quite the opposite of the grim, sexually repressed Freilichts. The narrator paints him as a stereotype of the over-

sexed black man, a "huge man pump[ing]his life's blood into her" (73). He has such sexual prowess that when Calla has intercourse with him she feels that "her consciousness [is] close to extinction" (73). Tyrell seems larger than the other characters in the farming community. He moves across the landscape, calling the land into life by finding underground springs. He exudes such an "air of boasting [that] Tintern had not the power...to withstand Tyrell Thompson's God-given mastery over water" (72).

Oates's narrator is so exaggerated in her portrayal of Tyrell that the careful reader must question whether or not Tyrell *is* a real character, or simply a projection of Calla's depressed fantasies, the compelling "darkness" that pulls her towards suicide. If he is the personification of the urge to suicide, then this interpretation would account for the way Oates's narrator insistently presents Tyrell as strong, dark, magnetic and looming. When Tyrell rows the boat towards the Falls he shows a strength and determination Calla lacks on her own. The restricted, suffocating life she has lived and the depression she is in provide her with no defense against the wiles of this con-man preacher. Whether he is a real character or projection of a suicidal fantasy, he knows how to access the underground stream of female sexuality as surely as he accesses underground water on farms. Calla's actions are dissociative when she relinquishes her will to Tyrell's desires, whether the reader views him as a real character or as a projection born of her depression. Calla mistakes Tyrell's wish as her dream, thinking "that the dream that contained her was a dream of her own deepest purest most

passionate wish and not a wish beyond her comprehension" (55).

Oates also interweaves another view of Tyrell, this one from Calla's family and the community in which she lives. Here the narrator's racial stereotyping runs wild; multiple portrayals of Tyrell are born. In the community, all accounts of the diviner's story are presented as fact, not hypothesis. He is said to be violent, to have a knife strapped to one of his calves "with which he'd slit the throats of many a white man" (62). He is said to have slit George Freilicht's throat, given Calla a baby "black and sinister as the Devil" (62). He is said to be a "known drinker" (63), to have saved himself from drowning after a brutal beating by whites as "*water was his friend and in his power*" (65).

[H]er black lover who was in some versions a water dowser clad in black near seven feet tall with a glass eye and a bad limp, in other versions a preacher with a scarred face and rope burns showing on his neck where he'd been hanged and left for dead or *maybe he's got nine lives, did actually come back from the dead vowing revenge* and in others a "rogue" of a Negro escaped from a chain gang in Georgia *come North to seduce white men's wives and take his pleasure and his revenge in one* (52).

When Calla's husband, George, attempts to murder her, a second dissociative event occurs. Crushed by what he believes is his wife's public flaunting of her sexual relationship with Tyrell, he drunkenly confronts her, calls her a whore, strikes her, then shoots directly at her face with his double-barreled shotgun. He misses his target, but Calla dissociates, experiencing the traumatic event as a kind of death:

Calla had been at home with her family on that day, she'd been at home with her family for weeks, impassive, silent, moving like a ghost among them. As if she had no physical being *like we didn't even belong to*

*ourselves any longer, just parts scattered like animal carcasses the dogs have torn at* since Freilicht had aimed the shotgun at her and in a way she'd died (64).

The most significant dissociative event, structurally and dramatically, occurs in the novella when Calla unquestioningly steps into the boat with Tyrell and allows him to row it towards the powerful Tintern Falls. For weeks prior to this moment, Calla's abrogation of her will with regard to Tyrell has become increasingly evident. She does not retreat when Tyrell is rough with her, "grip[ping] her throat in his huge hands not to choke her or even to frighten her but - perhaps - to suggest the idea of silence to her" (66). She does not register the cruelty in his voice when he taunts her with his "lightly mocking murmurous words, the whiskey rhythm beneath them: *"Ain't nobody forcing you to love me, honey, don't you know that, smart white woman like you?"* (66). Calla consciously believes that it is love she feels for Tyrell, but really she craves extinction, death, an ending. Twice in the weeks before she steps into the boat with him, Oates's narrator tells the reader: "[s]he wish[es] he'd strangled her: that would be an ending" (67). Calla even poses this same question directly to Tyrell "why didn't you strangle me then, that would have been an ending?" (69). Having posed the question, Calla immediately denies her thoughts and words: "But she didn't mean it of course. For never had Calla Honeystone been happier" (69).

The suicidal trip of these lovers over Tintern Falls forms the dominant structural axis of the text. Before the trip, there is a wish for death but no acting upon it; during the trip there is an implicit attempt to and an intent to die; after the

trip there is irrevocable change which chronologically splits the text in half and the survivor into two distinct pieces: one fragment is Calla's feisty independent and artistic personality alternately repressed by a suffocating family and critical community, then maddened with desire to merge with Tyrell; the other Calla fragment is the post-traumatic Calla, subdued, superficially fitting in with Freilicht mores, yet permanently stunted in her development as an artist. "For long spells of the life that remained stretching out seemingly without end Calla was physically disoriented; inhabiting her body as if it were another's" (94).<sup>33</sup>

Dissociative triggers in this text are more obvious on the surface than in other texts, but the associative connections Calla makes among ideas about birth, sex, death, suicide and fulfillment are more complex to sort out. Oates presents the creative process in the text as the death of the self. By presenting the image of Calla giving herself up to Tyrell in the boat, this text elides death with the self, just as earlier in the text Oates's narrator elides Calla's ideas on sex and birth with dying. To understand the complexities here more clearly, it is helpful to turn to an

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<sup>33</sup>Edith Wharton's novella *Ethan Frome* was published in 1911, and set in the hard-scrabble landscape of northern New England. The narrative has many interesting correspondences to Oates's *I Lock My Door*. In Wharton's story, Ethan Frome is the neglected husband, abused by his hypochondriac wife Zenobia's treatment of him. Ethan only becomes fully engaged in life when his wife's cousin, Mattie Silver, comes to live with them. Ethan's conscious act of steering the sled he and Mattie are on towards a large tree is an act springing from his intense sexual and emotional need for Mattie. His desire to merge with Mattie sexually is converted into a wish for death, which is, in fact, the only escape he can envision from his horrific marriage to Zenobia. The confusion of associations of birth, sex, death are similar to those discussed in Ernest Jones's "An Unusual Case of Dying Together," discussed in detail later in this chapter. For Ethan Fromm and Calla Honeystone Freilicht, the wish for death is really a desperate cry for meaningful life and love. In both texts, the accident results in a stabilizing of the originally unbearable situation. Calla fits in with the Freilichts; Ethan and Mattie, now unable to care for themselves as the result of the accident, live with and are dominated by Zenobia.

article in Ernest Jones's *Psycho-Myth, Psycho-History, Volume I*, entitled "An Unusual Case of Dying Together," where Dr. Jones examines the confused set of associations at work in a remarkably similar, but factual story of two lovers who died at Niagara Falls in 1912, the same year Oates's incident takes place. The idea of dying "in the arms of the loved one - 'gemeinsames sterben,'" Ernest Jones notes in his 1974 two-volume collection of essays, "symbolizes quite specific desires of the unconscious ... one in particular may be recalled - namely, the desire to beget a child with the loved one" (19). According to Jones, "[t]he unconscious associative connections between this desire" to beget a child and the notion of common suicide "are firmly established in psychoanalytical circles" (19). Jones makes this comment in his essay which relates the factual 1912 account of a childless Toronto couple who die together on an ice floe at Niagara Falls. The floe becomes separated from the winter ice bridge and so is being pulled inexorably towards "the terrible rapids that lead to the Niagara Whirlpool" (17).

Jones relates the incident in order to comment on the close association of notions of life, death and birth, and the disastrous results when these associations became confused by the childless Toronto woman, leading her to choose death over her natural instinct to survive. This real incident bears many strong resemblances to Oates's story, and it is entirely possible that one of Oates's creative impulses to write the novella came from reading the account of the lovers' death or Jones's psychoanalytical interpretation of it. Both events take place in upper New York State in 1912. Both events occur at powerful falls, the factual event at

Niagara Falls and Oates's fictional event at Tintern Falls. Both incidents occur in the presence of many eyewitnesses who line the banks bordering the water. While Oates's setting is a rural one in the Chautauqua River Valley and the crowd of farm people shouting is sparse, the 1912 event Jones describes is packed with thousands of onlookers. Unlike the Calla and Tyrell story, the husband at Niagara Falls tries in vain to save his wife who, fearful of losing her grip, refuses to cling to a lowered rope. By refusing to grasp the "last hope of safety" (17), the wife dooms both lovers to a horrible death. In the factual event, Jones comments, "it became difficult or impossible" (17) for the man to desert his wife especially because of the number of onlookers, and so he "knelt down beside the woman and clasped her in his arms; they went thus to their death" (17).

In Oates's narrative, Tyrell does not attempt to rescue Calla; in fact, he is instrumental in determining the lovers' destruction. Tyrell finds a boat and rows it to a point where the current takes over to carry them over the falls. Tyrell "lifts the oars and rests them calmly in place" (4), allowing both himself and his lover to face injury and death. Both Calla and the twenty-eight-year-old Toronto woman in the story Jones discusses are unable to exert their wills to survive at a crucial moment. Calla sits erect and immobile; the Toronto woman cries, "I can't go on. Let us die here" (16). For the Toronto woman the result is death; for Calla the result is permanent alteration. According to Jones, this emotional paralysis was first cited by Freud, and is "not so much a traumatic effect of fright as a manifestation of inhibition resulting from a conflict between a conscious and an unconscious

impulse" (18). Both Calla and the Toronto woman, on the surface, appear to possess the "unconscious impulse" to die, which Jones refers to as "automatic suicide" (18). In Calla's case, there is ample evidence of a depression severe enough to result in a desire to die. Calla is unable to express herself in the Freilicht household. The family's low angle of vision prevents her from developing. Calla is mute in the presence of the Freilicht family, and suffocated by her husband's unintellectual nature. Calla's wandering away from the house and the care of her own children, her failure to wash her body or her hair, her eating garbage like an animal, all support the notion of her being depressed and possibly suicidal.

The Niagara deaths have some other connections to Calla's accident. Jones makes the argument that the Toronto woman was drawn to Niagara Falls because of its associations with lovers, conceptions and births. He suggests that the couple made frequent trips there because they were drawn by their intense desire for a child. The fact that they went in winter, he argues, reflects a "corresponding attitude of hopelessness" (20) about ever being able to conceive a child. The Toronto woman's death, then, resulted more from her association of the hopelessness of conception with the hopelessness of "escaping from their threatened doom" (20) on the ice floe than it did to any desire to die.

If the reader views Calla as an artist figure in the text, some of the same confusion of associations that Jones points out about the Niagara Falls deaths can also be applied to her. As an artist, Calla wants to access her unconscious by having Tyrell's seed in her. If she enters the river with him there is a good chance

that she will be able to fertilize her ideas and have them bear fruit in the form of a creative work. Calla is drawn to the dangerous rapids not because she wants to die, but because she wants to experience the creative process in making art. Her focused attention and seeming immobility in the boat can be interpreted as her desire to listen to her imaginative impulse, to access her unconscious. Calla associates creating art with complete loss of self, a feeling close to the extinction of consciousness which she has also experienced in having sex with George Freilicht, and in bearing children. So the loss of self she feels is necessary to create art equals death in her thinking. It is this association of birth and sex with death that leads to her "accident," not emotional paralysis resulting from a conflict between conscious and unconscious impulses.

Finally, in his article on "Dying Together," Jones speculates on the Toronto woman's death being the result of her "excessive marital fidelity, to her determination that no one but her husband could rescue her." Calla's accident can be viewed in these same terms. She is an artist who must follow her creative impulses no matter what the consequences. She takes Tyrell's advice on developing her skill as an artist seriously:

A human being is born with a gift for water like for singing or dancing or preaching or fighting but then it's God's will you refine it. That means discipline, and hard work, and a right way of thinking, so that what is sacred is not cast down in the mud (45-46).

Like a besotted lover, the artist neglects her own safety while trying to bring her art to fruition. The somber note in Oates's text is that there is no artistic fruition in Calla's life. The creative pregnancy does not reach full term. The text

contains thirty-five numbered chapters before the accident, a week short of a viable birth, five weeks short of a full-term birth. The seed Calla carries onto the boat does not develop as both the fetus and Tyrell, the water dowser, are destroyed by the journey over the falls. Calla is permanently altered but not transformed in the process. She does not create any transformative art. "[S]he chose to withdraw inside the Freilicht household...to define herself as, not Edith Freilicht, for she was never apparently that woman, but a presence of no distinctive name or being or volition or wish" (84).

Like all artists, Calla risks failing, but, unlike other artists, she does not recover from the trauma of failing to stay submerged in her unconscious. She does not take an artistic risk again, but instead retreats to a heightened, but narrow angle of vision in the attic of the Freilicht house, "dreaming at [her] high window watching the river through the trees glittering like a snake's scale" (84). There she relives the truncated experience of creative pregnancy and labour she had on the trip to Tintern Falls:

*[P]ain came at unpredictable intervals sharp and stabbing as a bird's beak and she would lie motionless as a dead woman on her bed in that room sequestered beneath the eaves, a damp cloth over her eyes to assuage the curious pain that rose and broke, rose and broke like cascades of glittering white water in which she yearned to drown except her strong lungs refused to fill, choking and vomiting repeatedly she rid herself of it yet lay unmoving on the horsehair mattress (95 italics mine).*

*I Lock My Door* is a singularly impressive work because of the way Oates layers narrative versions, the voices becoming shards of glass that puncture the text. The story, related in a straightforward manner, appears simple but becomes

complex when the reader begins to question the veracity of the speakers and the facts they relate. There are three narrators, two character speakers and a community chorus. "[T]he narrator's powerfully nostalgic and lyrical voice", a voice that Oates referred to as the "right tone" (Johnson 361) for the novella, encompasses the text. Within the circumference of this lyrical narrative voice two other narrative voices of Calla's daughter, Emmaline, and Calla's unnamed granddaughter speak. Sometimes Oates has these narrators' words appear as if spoken to an interviewer; sometimes the italicized words give the impression of being the lyrical narrator's memory fragments which she has simply decided to interject into the narrative. Calla herself speaks a number of times in the text. Occasionally it is clear that her words are simply written representations of her thoughts, as when she finds the skeletons of dead birds and rodents in her old home. "*If you abandon me why then I will abandon you: You and Your Only Begotten Son both, ' she thinks*" (24). At other times - after George tries to shoot her and on the final page of the text - the character, Calla, speaks aloud. When Calla speaks at the end, the lyrical narrative voice of Oates's primary narrator is suspended and there are no other competing voices. Calla, now an arthritic old woman sitting in a "high-backed old wicker rocker" (98), describes coming home in the dark from the one-room school house, the children's lanterns lit like fireflies, and being "the last one on the road...-[a] long time ago" (98). With these words ending the text, Calla and Oates signal that the memories have been converted from the sepia-toned pictures of the event given by the granddaughter narrator in

the opening chapter of the text into a tale that can begin with the words which commonly open tales: "Once upon a time, *a long time ago*." The very use of these words signals the overriding narrative intention of the book - to show how tales and legends are created from events which a whole community has strong opinions about. The final version of the tale becomes a kind of distilled truth, perhaps quite distant from the original happening, but nevertheless carrying general lessons for readers in succeeding generations.

The entire text of *I Lock The Door Upon Myself* also can be seen as a comment on Fernand Khnopff's 1891 painting, a detail of which graces the front cover in *The First Plume Printing*, December, 1991.<sup>36</sup> The title of Khnopff's painting comes from a line in Christina Rossetti's poem, "Who Shall Deliver Me?" The poem is "threaded with the gloom of an anguished spirit whose sole desire is to renounce all that the world offers and to be delivered over to death" (Burns 85).<sup>36</sup> The poem begins with the poet's prayerful plea for God's help in bearing the burden of her self. Stanzas two to five establish the poet's depression. She bars everyone from herself; she "loathes" herself; she profoundly wishes to escape her melancholic state. These are all expressions of feelings and actions associated with

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<sup>36</sup>According to Michiko Kakutani, who wrote one of the two reviews published in *The New York Times* on *I Lock the Door Upon Myself*, Oates's text "is the first in a series of fictions based upon works of art that the Ecco Press is planning to publish" (NYTBR Dec. 11, 1990).

<sup>36</sup>Although Burns does not mention suicide, she does comment that "[t]he often morbidly introspective symbolist poets longed for a transcendental state of sleep-like death or death-like sleep" (Burns 83). She admits that Rossetti's solution in her poem is death, but considers Khnopff's iconography more secular because of its use of Hypnos. Burns also argues that Khnopff's takes the work beyond death to a "theme of psychic transmutation" (Burns 83).

burden of her self. Stanzas two to five establish the poet's depression. She bars everyone from herself; she "loathes" herself; she profoundly wishes to escape her melancholic state. These are all expressions of feelings and actions associated with depression: withdrawal, self-hatred, viewing death as a solution. Stanzas six and seven reveal the poet's dissociated self. The poet describes her depressed self as a "coward" and an "arch-traitor" to her *other self* (italics mine). The final stanza of the poem is a wish for death to "break the yoke and set me free" (Marsh 85). Sarah Burns, in her article "A Symbolist Soulscape: Fernand Khnopff's 'I Lock My Door Upon Myself,'" states that:

As Khnopff established his composition he transposed the most obvious suggestions from Rossetti's poem into strong pictorial symbols. The isolated, severely meditative woman is the locked-in self, and the coffin-object probably refers to the wished-for deliverance and freedom through death (Burns 81).

Burns sees both Rossetti's and Khnopff's aims as being "a course of rigorous introspection and self-scrutiny" (80), a leaving of the self in keeping with the ideas of French symbolism, not the wish to suicide which is being suggested here. The blue-winged bust of Hypnos, demi-god of sleep, is, according to Burns, a second focus of the painting . The author connects the bust of Hypnos with Poe's "The Raven." In Poe's story, a bust of Pallas resides "above the door in the speaker's gloomy chamber of memories" (Burns 82, Poe, "The Raven," line 41). Poe's bereaved poet-narrator wants to know whether he can ever be re-united with "a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore" (line 93). He begs for assurance that his life will not continue to be so empty: "is there balm in Gilead? - tell me -

tell me, I implore!" (line 89). The fact that the raven sits on top of the bust of Pallas was noted by one of Poe's associates to "signif[y] the ascendancy of despair over reason" (Goldhurst, 1404). The emblematic presence of the bust of Pallas in Khnopff's painting widens the meaning in Calla's story.

The opening chapter encapsulates the themes of death and suicide by verbalizing information contained in the section of the Khnopff painting which forms the cover of *I Lock My Door*. As usual with Oates, everything is not as it appears, however. The woman on the cover in the detail of Knopff's painting is red-haired, like Calla. Her eyes, again like Calla's, are "half shut so that milky crescents showed" (6) suggesting a trance-like state, where "vision itself seemed to withdraw" (6). The gaze of the subject is unfocussed, perhaps transcendent, perhaps mad, possibly romantic. The subject of Khnopff's painting is anchored, like Calla's life, in frightening reality. Her arms rest on a dark, oblong wooden object, which on the detail on the cover of the book appears to be a wooden ledge, but seen in the whole painting closely resembles a coffin (82). To the right and in front of his female figure Khnopff paints three orange day lilies, not the colour of lily usually associated with death. Day lilies are flowers that "open, bloom and fade in a single day" (86). Burns argues that these flowers "[b]y their very nature...suggest the subject of the painting: a fading, exhausted soul, enwrapped in transcendent death-dreams" (86). Oates, however uses a different type of lily in her text, a lily commonly associated with purity and with death. She describes the lily after which Calla is named, for example, as "a white beyond white: the sweet waxy

glaze of calla lilies, massed funeral flowers" (5). Oates makes use of the three day lilies depicted in Khnopff's work in structuring her text: the dead flower corresponds to Calla's attempted suicide and failed artistic goals; the open flower corresponds to Calla's journey out into the world to engage her imagination; the closed flower corresponds to part three of the text when Calla retreats for fifty years behind closed doors.

Oates clearly invokes Wordsworth in *I Lock The Door Upon Myself* by naming a mighty waterfall, the central instrument of change in the text, Tintern Falls. The name evokes Wordsworth's famous poem, "Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," a rondeau comprised of three distinct sections. In the rondeau form, the subject's circumstances are typically described in part one. The second section is devoted to describing the subject's transformative experience. The third part explores the subject's recollections of the experience in his or her imagination. In the third part, imagination and thought are combined with feeling to produce something new, a higher, more satisfying form. The three portions of Oates's text work like a skewed Wordsworthian rondeau. Like Wordsworth's subject, the young Calla who ventured out with Tyrell had:

An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, nor any interest  
Unborrowed from the eye ("Lines," 80-83).

Calla's experience in venturing out with Tyrell is not transformative, but psychologically and artistically crippling. After her near-death experience going over the falls, Calla retreats into the Freilicht home where she can live without

further danger to her body or her psyche. Unlike Wordsworth's vision, Calla's retreat is a costly one. By moving back into the Freilicht home, she has lowered her angle of vision, not widened it. The experience for Calla is not a change for the better as it was for Wordsworth in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey:"

-----and, in after years,  
 where these wild ecstasies shall be matured  
 Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind  
 Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms  
 Thy memory be as a dwelling place  
 For all sweet sounds and harmonies (137-142).

The memories of "sweet sounds and harmonies" in the quiet moments spent at Tintern Abbey offer Wordsworth solace, whereas the cacaphony of voices in Oates's novella offer Calla no choice but to seal herself off from their grating sounds. The chorus of voices in her farming community is full of strident criticism that fills the background whenever she ventures out. There are several distinct voices in the text: Oates's narrator, Calla's granddaughter Emmaline who pieces the story together, Calla, Tyrell, and the farming community.

Oates uses the voices to weave a richly textured account around a single image - that of two lovers unconsciously trying to die together. The voices are usually, but not always, in italics. They bombard the reader with opinions and fragments of speech. The arrangement of voices surrounding the actions of the lovers suggests a chorus in a Greek play. The voices also demonstrate how memories are replayed in an individual's mind. On the surface Oates presents the voices as if they are simply recorded snatches of comments from other sources, but

her focus in the text on attempted suicide suggests otherwise. It is not clear, however, whether she means the reader to take the voices as verbatim repetitions of what was said or as the imaginings of a creative narrator granddaughter who, as an artist, wishes to give shape to the story that has been passed down to her.

Oates uses dissociative ideas differently from other texts discussed in this thesis. Several of Calla's statements indicate that she is aware of the fragmentation taking place inside her mind. The first and clearest indication can be found in the opening lines of Part Two of the text: "And then her life was split irrevocably in two though not in half, she would recall that night" (55). The other is what is related by Oates's narrator as Calla's feelings about her sexual nature. When Calla stops refusing her husband's sexual advances and has sex with him, she feels the act of sex and the resulting pregnancies as deaths. Sex and pregnancy extinguish Calla's self. The strongly opinionated, headstrong child is gone after sex and childbirth, and what is left is an unengaged, lifeless automaton who has no sense of her role as wife or mother. She returns to the house where she has been abused as a child and stays there a number of times. Each time the Freilicht family brings her back.

Oates's narrator also uses Calla throughout the text as the image of the creation of the artist. From the first time Oates brings the character of Calla forward, it is clear that she is different from others. Calla has deep emotional responses. She is indifferent to, and uninfluenced by, community opinion. All this points to a person who has a highly differentiated point of view. Oates notes a

number of times that Calla has the ability to focus intensely, a "rapt attention" that is essential to any artist. Oates weaves the picture of an artist whose standards and experiences are vastly different from the community into a portrayal of madness, or an intricate game of voice which lulls the reader into a false sense of what the text is actually about.

In the style of the rondeau form used in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Calla is clearly located in Part One of the text, goes out of her self in Part Two when she gives up her conscious will to Tyrell's call, and comes back changed, a different self in Part Three. Whether Calla's journey is simply the factual story of which legends are made, the symbolic tale of the artist's attempt to enter the underground stream of the imagination, or an example of how the unconscious wish to die can gain ascendance over the conscious instinct to live is a question that bears discussing. In Oates's intricate way of writing, of course, it can be and is all these things simultaneously. Tyrell's presence, for example, can be understood as the "forbidden other," in Calla's mind. He could simply be a projection of the unexplored and the taboo. Tyrell also represents the dark, sexual and repressed side of Calla's imagination that is tapped when he arrives on the scene. Oates deliberately makes Tyrell black-skinned. She gives him the special power of divining by which he can locate the underground sources in the land and in the artist Calla. Oates's narrator is consciously heavy-handed in her use of racial stereotyping in her depiction of Tyrell. He is black and, in the community of Chataugua Falls, black is equated with the sinister, with forbidden sex, with death,

with the ability to con women. He has the power in his divining rod and in his penis (which she lacks) to gain access to the underground stream of her imagination. So strong is Calla's attraction to Tyrell that her depression seemingly disappears and she is willing to take risks and go out into the world.

If Tyrell is interpreted as a depressed fragment of Calla, then Tyrell is a dangerous influence pulling her towards death. If Tyrell is viewed as a life force, he is capable of regenerating her artistic impulse. As a projection of Calla's self, Tyrell is very dangerous; as the focus of a doomed love affair he provides a contrast to the repressed Calla in colour, power and sexuality. Headstrong Calla becomes curiously lacking in willpower from the first time she hears Tyrell call her. By the time she boards the boat, whose bottom is filled with brackish water there is an air of paralysis about her. She is described by her granddaughter at the start of the text as sitting in a boat erect, one hand serenely in her lap, the other white-knuckled from clutching the side of the boat. According to the granddaughter she appears to focus her attention on Tyrell, who is rowing the boat rhythmically in a zigzag fashion towards the falls. Having lived on the banks of the Chautaugua River all her life, Calla, a farm wife, knows full well what her fate will be should she step into the boat with Tyrell, yet she makes no attempt to stop the course of events.

This failure to act could be attributed to a variety of causes: on the initial level of the narrative, the failure to take action reflects Calla's desire to merge with her lover, no matter what the cost. On the level of viewing the book as a study of

depression, this paralysis could simply be Oates's way of demonstrating Calla's suicidal desires. The way Oates's narrator describes Calla sitting in the boat is the way a person who had abandoned her will to live would sit. The rhythmic motion of rowing could be the sensation of the current taking the boat through the water; the zigzag motion of the craft could be the effect of the current on its direction.

As an interpretation of an artist accessing the underground stream of the imagination, the act of stepping into the boat indicates a relinquishing of the conscious will to the underground stream of art. Once the creative process has begun, the artist is in the hands of her art. She is required to record where her imagination takes her. The artist is rushing towards both birth and death in engaging in the act of creation. The emotional commitment required of the artist may be destructive to her mental stability. On the other hand, what she is able to produce by connecting deeply with the unconscious stream of her imagination is such that there is an equal possibility of creating life in art, a true form of giving birth. When Calla steps into the boat, she is certain that she has Tyrell's "seed" planted in her womb. As an artist, she has an idea in her head, but is unsure of anything else. The act of stepping into the shallow brackish water at the base of the boat indicates the artist's decision to submerge herself in the unconscious. Initially, her "white knuckles" indicate that the artist is frightened. While she is still inside the boat, she is not yet completely submerged. Only the powerful Tintern Falls can pull the artist totally into the unconscious, and, if she survives the wrenching from the boat, which can be viewed as a fall into her imagination, she will, like

Wordsworth in "Lines: Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," return with a new angle of vision.

After the accident, Calla does indeed have a new angle of vision, but in a typical Oatesian twist, that angle is neither higher, nor deeper, but lower. On a psychological level, her desire for death abates, and Calla is able to fit into the restricted vision of the Freilicht family. She performs her repetitive tasks with full concentration. She no longer wanders away. She holds superficial conversations with the members of her family while maintaining emotional distance from them. She moves to the highest floor of the house and emerges from it only six times, on each occasion to attend a funeral. "Only at rare intervals in subsequent years were visitors, even her children, allowed to enter" (83). Calla's locking her door upon herself is a "gesture that lasted for life" (83), and it registers her regret at not dying with Tyrell. No longer does she go out, even in her imagination, as she cannot face repeating the pain of having entered the underground stream and having lost both her lover and their creation. Readers may assume that Calla still feeds her imagination in that room, as the dog-eared Bible found there after her death suggests. Reading narratives, and having the specific angle of vision that the top floor gives could keep Calla and her artistic impulses alive. She does not, however, produce any art after her accident. Fully entering the imagination is simply too much for her fragile mental state. In the attic, Calla is too removed from the life stream to have a fully realized artistic view.

Oates skews her use of the rondeau form, however in this text. There is no

transformation, simply irrevocable alteration. The incident does not lead to growth but stasis. Calla returns changed but not developed. She is impaired physically (84) and both her early feisty determination and her later trance-like robotic depression are gone, replaced now by a personality that makes her fit in with the family she once despised. The seed of creativity never fertilizes in Calla again. This is represented in the text by her refusal to leave the house except for funerals. The deaths are closures and endings, exactly what she had earlier wanted with Tyrell. There are no new beginnings. Calla's life viewed this way is an artistic failure. Rather than recording her experience on the river and describing the trauma of going over the falls, "the bloody miscarriage amid the catastrophe of the plunge over the falls, the smashed rowboat, the flailing, drowning broken bodies," (85) the pain she has experienced, Calla remains mute. Her family colludes with her silence. "[O]f course no one spoke and *no one was ever to speak*" (85). Calla remains in this state of emotional paralysis for fifty-five years. "A life split in two but not in half, the weight of it in the past and all that remained a protracted repetition of minutes, of peace" (88). As an artist, Calla cannot create images other than her own and "by slow ineluctable degrees the outer world diminishes and [her] own reflection defines itself without color, or texture, or depth or soul" (88). In failing to engage the outside world, Calla the artist forgets her self, and that is the tragedy of the text. On the surface, Oates lays down the Wordsworthian rondeau form, but subverts it by telling Calla's story - the narrative of the *artiste manqué*.

On the psychological level, the text develops the idea of the urgency of the

human desire to create, whether by biological procreation, or through creating art. Oates's narrator chooses to speak about a woman considered mad by her community, a woman whom the narrator demonstrates is both depressed and unconsciously suicidal. The narrative voices interplay to create a cacophony of sounds which the artist has to deal with before she can attempt to create. These voices can be viewed as dissociative fragments existing only in Calla's mind, or as the recorded comments of people outside herself. When the reader views the voices as fragments in Calla's mind, Oates appears to be setting up another fictional picture of the workings of memory and the problem it poses for an artist who must cut through all her subconscious prohibitions and buried impulses to assert her own opinion. When the reader views the voices as a cacophony of opinions bombarding the artist from the outside world, the courage necessary to become an artist is revealed.

An argument can be successfully established linking the news story on which the Ernest Jones article, "An Unusual Case of Dying Together" is based, to Oates's story. The Fernand Khnopff painting, a portion of which graces the cover of *I Lock My Door*, directs the reader to view the novella as having "at its very core the negation of life" (Jones 80). Khnopff proclaims a literary connection to Christina Rossetti by using a line from her poem, "Who Shall Deliver Me?" as the title; he embraces the poem as an inspiration for his visual portrait "of a complex state of mind" (Burns 80) in his 1891 painting, "I Lock My Door Upon Myself." Khnopff's visual configurations in his painting correspond both to Rossetti's subject

matter in the poem, and to Calla's state of mind as described by Oates's narrator in the text. When the text is conflated with the painting, it reinforces what Burns calls the "central idea of Khnopff's painting: the desire to discard the world and the flesh, and to escape to, or retire within a purely spiritual realm" (85). Rossetti's poem shows the disregard of self that Oates's narrator is exploring in Calla. There is something dissociated about Calla from early childhood. From a very young age she refers to herself in the third person. There is no indication of an integrated "I" in Calla at an early age. Rossetti's narrator calls her self an "arch traitor" and her own "deadliest foe" (lines 19-20), which corresponds exactly with the picture Oates creates of Calla and her disregard of her self in her depression. The suicide wish is paramount in Rossetti's poem, just as the idea of death, the ultimate non-engagement, is paramount in Fernand Khnopff's painting. The eyes of the subject in his painting are lifeless; the subject's arms rest limply on the coffin-like structure. The multi-paned door outlined in a circle to the left of the woman is opaque. It offers no view of an inner room or of a horizon. A bust of the demi-god of sleep, Hypnos (Burns 80) is prominently displayed to the right of the subject. All these images create the idea that what Oates will speak of in the text is death, and a sound case can be made for this in *I Lock My Door*. Oates, however, *never* speaks on one level, and the pounding heartbeat beneath the soothing lyricism of her words is a call to life. Calla's name is "a Call." Oates' truest story in this text is how one person deals with this call and fails to develop full psychological independence. Calla also signifies Oates's narrative view that, for better or worse, every human

being makes a statement with his or her life.

Oates once more has spun a text that yields a dizzying array of interpretations. Oates teases with the obvious, plays with voices, and finally leaves the reader to interpret the text. The genius of *I Lock My Door* is that it can satisfy a reader on so many levels. It is a poetically lyrical text about how legends are created. It is a textual explanation of Khnopff's 1891 painting, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. When it is examined in light of Ernest Jones's article on the 1912 incident at Niagara Falls, it becomes a psychoanalytical examination of how the desire to bear a child can be inverted to a yearning for death. The thirty-five short chapters tell the story of a pregnancy that does not reach full term and correspondingly the tale of an artist who attempts to create but does not reach the transformational level of true art.

Nothing is dead in this text. There is no recollection in tranquillity, and Oates's narrator makes fun of those who would mistake her lyrical power with words for lyrical meaning. Cary Kimble, reviewing the novella for *The New York Times Book Review* in 1990, said that Oates had "contemplated an artist's faded image and brought it to life (*Kimble* ). But rather than showing how an artist succeeds, Oates instead reveals how awful and constant the danger of failing is. Oates puts reality back into the picture of the ethereal artist. Demi-gods like Hypnos have no place in her universe, nor do milky white crescents of dreamy rolled-up eyes that grace the cover. There is life, risk, and consequence for everyone, especially the artist. In *I Lock My Door*, Oates displays the pain, the

danger, the consequences of trying to create art. It is not simply a lyrical process, or a psychoanalytical process. It is both of these and more.

## Part II

### *The Rise of Life on Earth: A Portrait of Clinical Dissociation*

*Virginia Woolf argued in a now famous essay that it is the task of the novelist not to imitate objective life by means of a plot, but to present the "luminous halo" or "self-transparent envelope" of consciousness as it is experienced inwardly.*

(Joyce Carol Oates)

Oates's 1991 publication of the novella *The Rise of Life on Earth*,<sup>37</sup> praised by the *New York Times Book Review* as one of that year's most notable books, uses the dissociative process to sketch the seemingly straightforward portrait of a traumatized person in the character of Kathleen Hennessy. However, Oates's text is about more than victimization and the toll abuse exacts in the world. The Edward Hopper painting on the book's cover, the dedication, which reads "For The Kathleens," and the excerpt from a 1912 Egon Schiele letter<sup>38</sup> that Oates uses as an epigraph:

The picture must give out light in its own,  
bodies have their own light that they exhaust

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<sup>37</sup>References to *The Rise Of Life On Earth* from this point on will be made by page number only

<sup>38</sup>Egon Schiele, according to the *Reader's Encyclopedia*, was an Austrian expressionist painter, taught by Gustav Klimt. He painted landscapes, portraits, and nudes with an intensity evinced by their vibrant colors and angular black lines. His career was short, and he died impoverished in the 1918 influenza epidemic (Benet 871).

all support the idea that Oates's intention is to draw another fictional picture of the psychological truncation caused by trauma. Oates's narrative intention is wider, however. She uses the novella to show how a psychic wound, a violent assault on the mind or body, affects "the whole organization of the psyche" (LaPlanche 466), and to demonstrate the impact of such traumatic experience on others. This is the first of Oates's texts discussed in this thesis where murder is the result of a character splitting through dissociation. The fact that a number of deaths occur as a direct result of Kathleen's treatment as a young child brings up ethical questions about how to apportion culpability for the crimes, and complicates the issues of the text immensely. On the surface, Kathleen is a fully functioning, though intellectually limited adult. Because her intelligence is not high, she holds fast to the slogans and the lessons she learns: "One thing cancels out another" (38). "You learn not to look back...You don't cry.... If you do, it isn't you" (39). Kathleen picks up mottoes from a variety of places: "COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS" from her connection with the Wayne County Department of Health (55); "Yes, You Can, Kathleen: OH YES, YOU CAN!" (57) from Mrs. Feinberg at Warren P. Wilson High School; "Faith is everything!" (58) from the Home Economics teacher, Mrs Moynahan. Rev. Deck and his wife tell her that Jesus loves her and forgives her sins (59). Bobbi McDermott, the nurse who explains the duties of the nurse's aide to her, tells her it is the "individual's God-given disposition that counts" and "[a]ctions speak louder than words" (61). Kathleen

believes that all these people see "her soul like a shimmering flame they did not see me in the flesh at all but another standing where I stood" (62).

Under certain conditions that the narrator specifically describes, Kathleen's complex of feelings around being maltreated by her alcoholic father and unprotected by her mother are triggered. A fragment of her personality that holds those incidents of abuse encapsulated temporarily takes control. When this occurs, Kathleen behaves in a manner opposite to her "normal" state; the nurse's aide then systematically murders patients in her care. The narrator in the text meticulously presents what triggers Kathleen's dissociation before she fragments and murders: rejection or belittling by a man, being made to feel inferior or invisible, being replaced as the object of affection. The narrator externalizes the rage Kathleen feels in these situations by presenting her as experiencing the sensation of ants crawling all over her skin, "fiery red ants" (94). This is the signal that Kathleen is entering into a dissociated state, one in which she will kill people while remaining unaware of the consequences of her actions and maintaining a placid, cheerful exterior. Ant imagery always indicates impending dissociation in the text.

The image of fire represents both Kathleen's rage and her idealized image of herself as a "shimmering flame...not ugly or clumsy like a cow" (62). Fire emblemizes her intense anger; it is also a central event in the text. When Kathleen is in foster care in the Chesney household, a fire occurs which kills four people, including Kathleen's mentor, friend and mother-substitute, Mrs. Chesney. The reader eventually surmises that it is Kathleen who, in a dissociated state, has set

the fire. The narrator in Oates's text never says definitively that Kathleen has done it. This technique of narration in the text is important because it mirrors the workings of Kathleen's brain. She has a myriad of fragments floating randomly in her head - mottoes to live by, rules she has internalized, feelings she is unable to articulate, actions she cannot explain. Since she cannot piece them together, she takes her hospital training in hand-washing and death-pack procedures "very seriously; she views them as clues to a fundamental principle of the universe...the human world so difficult to comprehend let alone negotiate" (63). The narrator gives all the same fragments of information to the reader to reproduce exactly what Kathleen is experiencing. By emphasizing Kathleen's "fascinat[ion] to the point of trance" in all matters procedural, the narrator reveals to the reader the chaotic inner state in which she lives. The narrator also maintains a stance of detached irony which is discomfiting. The position the narrator assumes signals the reader to note this chain of events and then to grasp the point that is being made: people like Kathleen might never be caught. There are a multitude of Kathleen's out in the world, the narrator implies - all maltreated, all fragmented, all possibly hurting others because they have been hurt.

Oates's narrative interest in the text is not limited to demonstrating how dissociation is triggered by a cluster of feelings around being devalued and invisible in society. Her deeper interest, and one that can be easily missed, is her examination of the long-term effects of rage on Kathleen and on her innocent targets in a succession of hospitals. In the five convalescent homes, clinics, and

nursing homes in which she works during her career, "Kathleen Hennessy would find herself in a succession of selves performing by rote with unfailing confidence and always with satisfaction these seemingly ancient rites pertaining to the dead: to Death" (75). Following the death-pack procedure on a patient who has died of natural causes or on a patient she has killed, gives Kathleen a sense of satisfaction. In performing the procedures in exact order she gets to dispose "of all contaminated material" (77). This need to de-contaminate preoccupies Kathleen because she has been permanently contaminated by her father. The stain will not wash out, and so she must cut it out, as she does when she gets pregnant with Orson's child. Both rage and pity move Kathleen to murder:

[S]ometimes so pitying one of her helpless charges she would find herself pressing a pillow against the face, sometimes it was an indefinable and abruptly overpowering rage that moved her (133).

Kathleen regards death as a state of serenity. "Now the worst has been done" (133). As an abused person, it is her wish to experience this state of serenity herself, so she takes pleasure in knowing that it is the case for others. As long as life proceeds in an expected and orderly fashion and Kathleen's cluster of intense feelings is not triggered, she remains sweet, responsible, a credit to her community. But when her position in her household is threatened or she is sexually demeaned, Kathleen dissociates and takes revenge. The fire at the Chesney household is a good example. Two changes occur there that affect Kathleen before the fire: first, Mrs. Chesney's grown son, Tiger, becomes a threat to Kathleen. He mercilessly teases her at the dinner table, then repeatedly and intentionally walks by her with

his pants unzipped, while calling to her in a low whistle. "[W]hat a sad mutt she is Tiger said, that kicked-dog look so you naturally want to give her another kick..."(37). Second, and coincident with this treatment by Tiger, is the fact that Kathleen's favoured position in the household is being threatened by a new and younger foster child, Rose Ann. A fire then occurs in the household, in which four people die, including Mr. and Mrs. Chesney and Tiger, but blame is never attached to Kathleen. On the contrary, she is declared a hero for saving little Rose Ann's life. Kathleen believes she is blameless in the setting of the fire because "all who watched were blameless" (73), and she ran outside with Rose Ann.

In the case of the Chesney fire, the narrator implies that Mrs. Chesney is the cause. She is a heavy smoker and the "probable cause of the fire had been a smoldering cigarette in a clump of oily rags in a closet" (48). Later in the text the narrator, after denying repeatedly that it could have been Kathleen who set the fire, impugns her, but circuitously. "Perhaps in fact it had *not* been she who'd dropped a lighted cigarette into a greasy rag hidden in a closet at the front of the house" (73 *italics mine*). The way the text is constructed here makes it unclear whether this is the opinion of the narrator, or a fleeting realization going through Kathleen's mind.

To indicate dangerous levels of rage building up, the narrator notes repeatedly in the text that Kathleen is experiencing the "sensation of ants rippl[ing] across...[her] skin...something pent up in the air before an electrical storm that must be discharged" (42) . Storms of emotion, "rage [comes] over her like fire" (24) when she is in these states. When Kathleen is caring for the new foster infant

at the Chesney's house, for example, she begins to dissociate when the baby squirms. The squirming baby brings back Kathleen's memory of her baby sister, Nola, squirming as she tried to keep her quiet during one of her father's alcoholic rages. Kathleen relives banging Nola's head rhythmically on the floor to quiet her and protect her from her father: "and Nola screamed and kicked at her as Kathleen straddled her banging her head against the floor, her silly little head, coconut-head, head like a damn dumb doll's" (23). The complex of intense feelings around killing Nola in this way begins to trigger a dissociative state in Kathleen. "[T]he sensation as of ants, fiery ants, ran over her skin, startled she whispered, - 'oh Baby, no: that's bad,' yet Baby persisted...and Kathleen Hennessy stood paralyzed" (44). When Mrs. Chesney enters the room, she senses danger and removes the baby from Kathleen's care. This prevents Kathleen's re-enacting Nola's murder.

Kathleen's dissociative tendency is further substantiated by the problem she has distinguishing between fantasy and reality. She has multiple voices in her head. The narrator states that "so much happened in the crowded interior of her skull by day and by night she had learned to be wary - 'Is it real - is it real - really?' " (49). Kathleen's actions accurately depict the unconscious revenge of the traumatized child.

The narrator of *The Rise of Life On Earth* begins the text by listing the injuries suffered by the eleven-year-old Kathleen Hennessy, when she is brought to Children's Hospital in Detroit in April, 1961. The injuries are announced in a detached, unemotional tone. The battered child has "a head concussion, broken

ribs, a broken finger, and numerous bleeding wounds and bruises on her head, and face, torso, legs from a severe beating her drunken father had given her" (5). The narrator describes the patient as being "unengaged" (8) and passive. As her physical wounds heal, the narrator reports that Kathleen's actions remain at an animal level: she eats with "insect duty and rapacity...her entire body involved in the act of swallowing" (8). From the clinical setting, Oates's narrator takes the reader to the equally sterile setting of the courtroom, where "the men in charge, the men in suits, ties...continued their agenda (15), by formally hearing the criminal charges brought against Kathleen's father, Joseph Hennessy - severe battering of one daughter, and the murder of a second daughter, Nola. The narrator describes the "taciturn, virtually mute" (13) man as giving "an impression of matter precariously poised... a landslide about to discharge itself...a tense gathering of molecules about to strike in a single improvised yet lethal direction" (13). When Mr. Hennessy grins, there is a sound of "escaping steam" (13). Joseph Hennessy's relationship to the court is only established when he explodes, erupting against the faces "of determined civilization" by bursting into a paroxysm of fury. When his brutal actions are described, however, Joseph displays neither emotion nor "awareness of the novelty of this absence of remorse" (17). Only when the taped testimony of Kathleen is played does he become conscious of the precariousness of his situation. Kathleen's recorded words, the narrator stresses, sound "beyond any *apparent* capacity for subterfuge as it was beyond any *apparent* volition (17-18, italics mine).

She spoke slowly, gropingly, with an air of wonder, her words seemingly disconnected as the actions of a sleepwalker, slow flat vague words, uttered with effort, the pauses between words sibilant as if with unarticulated speech, the interstices of the words charged as if with static electricity: '...Daddy...hit me. I don't...know why. I...don't know if I was bad. He...hit me and, and Nola....' (17).

Kathleen's slow way of speaking, her "slow flat vague words" (17), the gaps, half sentences, and pauses are recognizable manifestations of a traumatized, fragmented individual, yet the narrator undermines the pathos of her speech by prefacing it with observations on her lack of "apparent subterfuge" (17). This indicates that this victim, Kathleen, might be wily enough to give a performance that will doom her father. Joseph Hennessy is responsible for Nola's death through his brutal beating of his children, but the reader does not learn until chapter three that it was Kathleen, fearful of further abuse from her father, and dissociated by fear and rage when Nola was unable to stop crying, who actually killed her. Initially, Joseph is confident that he will be found innocent of murdering his daughter. But as he realizes "how badly he is being judged by these men in charge of civilization" (18) during the hearing, he agrees to a charge of manslaughter. Kathleen, though dissociated and abused, the narrator now implies, has had the instinctive cunning to use her victimization to take revenge on her father.

Even cunning or instinct to survive does not erase the fact that Kathleen Hennessy is truly a victim. "It was as if whatever her father had done to her had left the girl so permanently entranced, little else might draw out her fullest response" (7). The text opens with the narrator telling us that "[p]eople made false estimates of her" (3). "Rarely does she lie," the narrator states, or "even compose

her face in an artful manner to deceive"(3). The text, on the other hand, demonstrates the opposite. Kathleen may not lie by word because she is nearly mute in the text. She does, however, lie by deed, becoming the opposite of what she purports to be - a nurse who kills rather than heals. It is not necessary for her to be artful. Having a shell makes Kathleen Hennessy almost impenetrable. Living inside a hard shell, Kathleen is like a "limpet which attaches itself to a ship's hull, exploding after a set time." (*O.E.D.* 584). Rage, triggered by a complex of emotions, makes her break out of her shell and explode. Between storms of rage, she clings to the comforting procedures in her job as a nurse's aide. When her rage is triggered, however, when she feels or is made to feel invisible or worthless, she explodes by quietly killing others.

Kathleen's consistently cheerful exterior is the most dangerous sign of her repressed rage. Oates's narrator shows the reader that Kathleen is indiscriminate in her cheerfulness. Whether she's being asked to help herself to food, scrub the floor, or engage in coercive sex, her answer is always the same: "Don't mind if I do" (35). On the surface she is consistently accommodating, diligent, respectful. Underneath, she is constantly settling accounts. Kathleen's buried rage triggers periods of dissociative activity whenever she is overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and invisibility. Oates, through her narrator, is questioning whether, under the circumstances, a person like Kathleen can be held morally responsible for acts of rage, even multiple murders.

Oates's narrator never disputes the guilt Joseph Hennessy bears for beating

his children, nor does she excuse Kathleen's mother for abandoning her children, but she does bring the fine lines between guilt and innocence under microscopic examination, even when abuse is present. The conundrum in Oates's text is that, if it is read carelessly, it might be viewed simply as a portrait of a marginal member of society who is treated abusively. In reality, it is a study of the consequences of rage in one woman marginalized by her dysfunctional family, invisible in the social power structure. Through her narrator, Oates is saying that people like Kathleen should be viewed sympathetically; on the other hand, readers should be aware that people who have suffered like this can also be lethally dangerous.

The question which remains about this dual presentation of the victim-murderer is why Oates's narrator goes to such lengths to camouflage her real intentions. The positioning of her Schiele quote at the start of the book, and the dedication of the book, "For The Kathleens," both distract the reader from her more complicated discussion of the issue of rage and its effects in the world. Even the Edward Hopper painting, "Morning In A City," (1944)<sup>39</sup> which graces the cover, startling in the sense of vulnerability it conveys, adds to the impression that Oates's concentration in this piece of fiction is the vulnerable female victim. Oates's title would more aptly fit the discussion of the text were it *The Rise of Rage on Earth* or *The Rage in Life On Earth*.

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<sup>39</sup> In his introduction to *Edward Hopper and the American Imagination*, Lyons states that Edward Hopper's art has given America "a compelling reflection of itself....[I]n Hopper's paintings we find seemingly ordinary experiences of our individual lives elevated to something epic and timeless, and yet his work appears deceptively simple and straightforward." (xi).

The title Oates chose for the text, *The Rise of Life On Earth*, has the same title as an essay Orson Abbott, the man Kathleen loves, wrote in medical school. His paper discussed "[t]he emergence of life-forms out of ... mere matter and the evolution of these life-forms into ever more complex labyrinthine structures of flesh...[and] bone" (110).. When Orson's essay is carefully examined, however, no mention is made of a higher intellectual development occurring as the DNA strands reproduce; he writes only of physical matter out of control, and excludes any mention of the brain or the emotions. Oates chooses the title *The Rise of Life On Earth* ostensibly because it has significant connection to her narrator's view that a myriad of humans, with the exception of Orson, have failed to develop beyond the recessed-eyed, mollusk-shelled creatures like Kathleen and the members of her foster families. The Oatesian twist is that the socially marginalized people on whom she concentrates most of her narrative, are clearly more than flesh, bone and small brains. They are people with feelings, each with his or her own constellation of emotions which triggers action. They are unaware, however, of the cycle in which they are caught: neither Kathleen nor the succession of foster families with whom she lives - the Chesneys, the Deitches, the Sweetmans, the McClures - understands the hopelessness of their position in the world.

Orson is an idealist and a drug addict. The combination impedes his judgement. The son of a highly successful physician, too sensitive and cynical for the medical profession and strung out on drugs, he is unequipped for the incompetence and mistakes he sees; he is unable to bear the medical system he is

in. Abbott is horrified to be part of a group that profits from people in the guise of caring for them, covers its medical blunders to protect its members, then moves to practicing comfortable medicine in the wealthy suburbs rather than taking on the overwhelming medical challenges in the inner city. Unlike Kathleen, Orson is shell-less and will certainly destroy himself. He lacks the professional distance he needs to survive in his profession. He is also crippled by rage at his successful father who serves millionaires rather than the needy inner-city residents. It is Orson who feels intense pain about what he sees in his daily life at the hospital and how the hospital hierarchy reflects the powerlessness of the poor and the uneducated in the outside world. Abbott feels intensely that in Kathleen, in the underprivileged and hopeless patients he sees every day, his nightmare about randomly reproducing matter is actualized. The intensity of this realization haunts him so much that he spins out of control on drugs to block the pain he feels. His downward spiral is accentuated by the fact that he feels he has profoundly disappointed his father, a prominent vascular surgeon. His anger at himself for being unable to learn to ignore the needy, as his father does, lies behind the conflict he experiences when he sees Kathleen: he is attracted by her soft, comforting body, and by her simplicity; at the same time he is repulsed by her large-sized body and small head and her failure to understand that she is being used by the hospital system. Kathleen becomes the receptacle for Orson's rage; his treatment of her demonstrates his inability to move beyond responses of revulsion and defensiveness.

The Edward Hopper painting, "Morning in a City" (1944) is more Oates

subterfuge. Like Kathleen, Hopper's nude is red-haired. Like Oates's character, the buttocks and hips of the woman are heavy-set, and her skin looks translucent, with the exception of her breasts, which are very pink, as if sore, engorged, tender to the touch. The woman, who is painted from a side perspective, is holding what looks like a white towel in front of her breasts and genitals. Her eyes are dark, and she appears expressionless as she faces the window and the cityscape beyond. The room in which she stands, like the room in which Kathleen lives, is shabby. The single bed indicates that the woman is alone. The subject in Hopper's painting could be about to act; for Oates's narrative purposes, the painting could represent the moment when Kathleen's internalized rage dictates that she must abort the baby or the moment just prior to her beginning the sterilizing procedures for the abortion. The painting brings into focus the fact that Kathleen's dissociative rage is not only turned outward on others but is also turned inward on herself.

The translucence of the model's skin in the Hopper painting parallels Kathleen's near invisibility in the text. Kathleen's seems invisible because she lacks a firmly entrenched sense of herself as a result of her father's abusive treatment of her and her limited intelligence. Kathleen simply internalizes what others have shown her about herself through their words, actions and attitudes. She realizes her teeth are ugly when a teacher tells her she does not have to cover her mouth (35); she understands co-workers think she is stupid when she overhears a conversation about her while she crouches inside a lavatory stall (70); she refuses to believe Orson when he tells her she is merely being exploited by the system,

feeling instead insulted that he is demeaning the job she is so proud of:

You should find a better job, for one thing. Stop letting them exploit you. Colonize you. The hospital is a business, a capitalist enterprise, they're out for profits and they treat nurses like shit let alone nurse's aides and orderlies, janitors, secretaries, anyone they can get away with treating like shit including in fact the young professionals meaning me but there's some point to my enslavement...(104).

Like a mollusk clinging to a rock when the tide goes out, Kathleen clings to her job. She understands that her manner and her "recessed eyes" (3) command no attention; that her voice is small and not articulate enough to be heard. Her soft body and huge breasts, however, speak loudly to men who see her merely as a sexual receptacle, and project their sexual longings onto her. Oates's narrator stresses that her "pert, moist, pink rosebud of a mouth, a miniature mouth...remind[s] observers of a part of the female anatomy that is private and should not be exposed to the casual eye" (4). Kathleen's mouth is seen as a sexual receptacle rather than as a conduit of the working mind.

A complex of emotions surrounding Kathleen's feelings of invisibility and powerlessness unleashes her silent but deadly rage. Her fury is powerful because she has experienced it repeatedly at her father's hands. Kathleen's very existence triggers her father's rage over his loss of his wife; his two young daughters become the externalization of his wife's abandonment. Kathleen's rage does not burn itself out because her unresolved anger fuels her to compulsively repeat the abuse she has experienced. Her periods of dissociation coincide exactly with episodes of explosive rage. In between these episodes, two fragments of her personality are evident. One is practical and procedural:

Not romantic, nor deluded. Sobriety best suited her. Diagrams. Brushes and detergent. White nylon, white stockings, and white rubber-soled shoes (122).

This practical side allows her to perform her job effectively. When she is dissociated, the procedural aspect of her personality helps her to detach from all emotion while killing. Another fragment of her personality is vulnerable, emotionally needy, deeply feeling. This part of Kathleen is romantic. In the text, Kathleen yearns for a diamond ring like her newly engaged co-workers are proudly displaying. This romantic side of Kathleen's personality comes closest to the surface when Orson Abbott appears to show more than sexual interest in her (106-108): "[I]t was the first time in months of knowing each other that he'd ever asked her any questions of a personal nature" (107). The sexual scene following this apparent tenderness in chapter five, however, is grotesque, ending with Kathleen:

whimpering louder, pleading at last not words but sheer sound rising from her frightened throat rising to a scream still he was trying to come and could not and then she screamed. And then he came (112).

Kathleen learns through her abusive relationship with Dr. Orson Abbott that she "[is] invisible and would forever be thus" (132), that pain and suffering and death are therefore irrelevant. Because of this, and her earlier abuse and abandonment by her parents, Kathleen moves through her life like a robot. She can eschew conscience and responsibility and hide behind procedures and systems in the hospitals and nursing homes in which she works. When Orson rejects Kathleen and her fetus, the practical side of Kathleen's dissociative "nurse's aide" personality gains ascendance.

Knowing there is no hope can be a wonderful thing and now she knew, now she would do it, what must be done, for Kathleen Hennessy's nature was practical and procedural after all (122).

Without apparent emotion Kathleen plans to "abort the fetus before it acquired eyes, a mouth, a voice, a soul" (122). After a couple of months she forgets Orson "as one might forget any trivial fact" (123) because Orson "looked through her as if she were no more than airborne dust" (123). The fetus replaces Orson, just as earlier in the text one foster family had cancelled out another, one baby had cancelled out her sister Nola, one fire had cancelled out the problematic circumstances in the Chesney household. Each time this happens, Kathleen's maxim that "whatever is, is now: all else cancelled out" (48) is reinforced.

Kathleen's dissociated rage is the most powerful aspect of her personality. It becomes ascendant whenever she is made to understand by another person that she is worthless, powerless, invisible - "invisible thus excluded from the human world of power" (134). Rage is Kathleen's flame; it does not burn away but rather ignites a fire that kills members of the Chesney family without immediately implicating her. Oates's narrator is slippery and deceptive; she is creative in the murders she invents and in the clues she leaves as to perpetrator of the crimes committed. It is often difficult to discern if deaths are accidental or premeditated. The narrator confuses the fast or casual reader by over-use of personal pronouns. Her pronoun references, unless meticulously traced through previous sentences, can implicate the wrong person. In the case of the fire at the Chesney's house, the narrator presents Mrs. Chesney as a chain smoker. She indicates that a rageful

person exists under Mrs. Chesney's cheerful exterior: "I'm gonna come back as something real tough, rubbery like a Goddamn *toad*. See what the fuckers can do to me then" (46). To a careless reader, it is unclear in the text whether this statement comes from Mrs. Chesney, whom the reader has rarely seen angry, or from a fragment of the rage-filled Kathleen, whose anger we are already well-acquainted with. Clues as to who actually started the fire are scattered throughout the text and are always undermined by words such as "surely," "maybe," "might," so that the narrator appears unreliable and the reader is left in doubt whom to blame. The clearest indictment of Kathleen occurs when she is safely outside, watching the fire:

Kathleen crouched with her fingers jammed in her mouth entranced as the fire illuminated the now unrecognizable house from within like a *gigantic breath*. *You fuckers: now you see* and the firemen were large tiny insects drawn by the heat and beauty of the fire but powerless against it for as long as she watched (50).

Another murder occurs just before Kathleen informs Orson that she is pregnant. Orson, high on drugs and observing her tears, tells her: "Jesus. You shouldn't cry. It changes your face to a pig's - a pig's snout (118). This cruel insult, combined with the fact that even after Orson knows about her pregnancy "he seemed to have forgotten [it] as one might forget any trivial fact...for now again Kathleen had ceased to exist for him" (123), leads to another incident of Kathleen inflicting death.

[U]nobtrusively and wholly without detection, almost without awareness she saturate[s] several small sponges with the mouth-suction drainage of a hepatitis patient...to carry into private and semi-private rooms...and to introduce to patients as opportunity granted (124).

As her rage surfaces, other deaths, appearing random, "occurred now and then" (133) in circumstances where death is neither unexpected nor inevitable.

[S]he would find herself pressing a pillow against the face, sometimes it was an indefinable and abruptly overpowering rage that moved her...understan[ing] that yes it had been done to her too, such deaths leave no marks, simply a cessation of life (134).

The motif of contamination that runs through the text is also operative in her relationship with Dr. Orson Abbott. One sexual encounter Kathleen has with Orson results in a visible contamination of the "most beautiful article of clothing Kathleen Hennessy had ever owned" (83). The clot of Orson's semen on her skirt triggers her shame over being contaminated, and results in her killing a young patient, "exhausted from cerebrovascular disease" (84). Kathleen knows "the terrible secret strength of those whom the human world has made invisible" (133). When Orson leaves the "nasty dried clot of semen" (83) on her best skirt, Kathleen first suppresses her rage by transposing it into a Biblical proverb: "Yet it is promised: the first shall be last and the last, first" (83). Soon after this incident, however, when no one "would have suspected her of harboring a certain cruelty in her heart" (84), she takes the life of a young married woman being fed through the nostrils by gavage. No one ever suspects her.

[A]nd according to the nurse who began the procedure and the nurse's aide who completed it and remained afterward to tidy up there had been no apparent change in the woman's condition: respiration normal, heartbeat normal, response to the feeding normal...(85).

In the final section of the text, Kathleen turns her dissociated rage on herself while she aborts the "glowing gem" (114) of a baby she wants and is

carrying. Being abused by a drunken father has started this cycle of rage; being made aware of her invisibility in the world has fanned it. When Kathleen infects, smothers, aborts, kills, she sees herself as an angel of mercy who is moved by pity. There is no indication in the text that she understands that each feeling of pity triggers an "overpowering rage" (133) that allows her to act. Oates's narrator sees the connection, but she does not go out of her way to spell out that connection to her readers.

The ideas of contamination and shame are important motifs in the text. Because of the abuse she has suffered, Kathleen always feels contaminated. Sex equals contamination for her, although she acquiesces to it with many men. "[S]o long as she did not resist she would not be hurt or insulted or rarely so" (81). Sometimes after dates, "she'd force herself to vomit, liquor, food, semen" ... then "the relief of the enema." After these procedures Kathleen felt "restored to herself" (81). Becoming a nurse's aide is her way of channeling this fear of contamination into a respectable profession. The procedures required in a sterile hospital setting provide Kathleen with a way of containing her anxiety about being overwhelmed by these feelings of defilement, and the resultant sense of shame it triggers. She can easily project her feeling of being tainted on the hospital world because it *is* a contaminated environment, and it *does* require constant vigilance to protect patients from infection. Her dissociative acts are fueled by fear of further contamination, and as she carefully follows sterile hospital procedures, she simultaneously solidifies her reputation as a competent, diligent, and valuable

worker who abides strictly by hospital rules. This reputation, combined with her apparent meekness and lack of intelligence, is what protects her from suspicion when deaths occur in places in which she works. Kathleen is able to function in her job by remaining disconnected from her rage. Oates's narrator states that Kathleen is like a "succession of robot-selves ....performing by rote with unswerving confidence and always with secret satisfaction certain procedural rites" (134). Kathleen remains passive, unthinking, robotic to avoid feeling the tumultuous rage that makes her destructive whenever a complex of emotions around powerlessness and invisibility is triggered.

Kathleen's desire to protect the shame of her own contamination creates her need to be meticulous. The narrator demonstrates this need by emphasizing the absolute cleanliness of her person and her dress, and her meticulous execution of hospital procedures - from how to make a bed by the standards of hospital regulation, to the more complicated death-pack procedure she so enjoys. The completion of each procedure leaves Kathleen temporarily assured that there is one less contaminant or contaminating person in the world to hurt her. As in other texts, a traumatic experience is central to the personality and behaviour of the central character. But in *The Rise Of Life On Earth*, the cost of an individual's traumatic experience is not only loss of a fully developed self, but also a myriad of deaths in the community in which the victim works. In this text in particular, the subject under discussion by Oates's narrator is rage, not victimization. Rage is a much more unwieldy subject than victimization because it pulls the victim outside

the position of being a person acted upon and makes him or her bear some responsibility despite the circumstances of the original trauma.

A second motif in the text is the idea of penetration. The word is used in the text in both a sexual and an emotional sense. There are two important penetrations of Kathleen. One is her penetration, physical and mental, by young Dr. Orson Abbott. He successfully penetrates the shell Kathleen has erected around herself, then cruelly insists that she understand who she is in the American hierarchy - an invisible being, a nobody. When Kathleen consciously understands this, her rage is unleashed and innocent people die. Orson has the status that Kathleen will never have. When he confers attention on her, he offers her something she only reads about in her young-adult romance novels. Because he is so elevated in the hospital hierarchy, his entrance into her life produces a fissure in Kathleen's self-contained world of lowly nurses' aides. When he is on drugs, Orson vents his rage in brutal sex with Kathleen. Kathleen, accustomed to abuse, quietly acquiesces, at least for a time. He forces her to have oral sex, he bruises and scratches her genitals, which simultaneously comfort and disgust him. When he comes down from his drug-induced state, however, Oates shows Orson as an intensely suffering human being, gifted with insight but lacking the instinct to protect himself. Orson's need to degrade himself corresponds to Kathleen's need to be abused, as she equates this treatment with love. When Orson has genital sex with her for the first time, Kathleen screams. The sound of Kathleen's pain brings Orson to orgasm and results in Kathleen's pregnancy.

The second important penetration of Kathleen is by her own hand in the abortion scene in chapter eight. The scene shows the practical and procedural part of Kathleen acting to block any feelings that might interfere with the deadly procedure she is performing on herself in the bathtub at home. Ignoring her desire to have a baby to love, she sets out to destroy what she desperately wants. She knows simultaneously that: "I want to have my baby, it's my baby, I would not then ever be lonely again" (121); at the same time she understands that she will abort it. This is a stunning occurrence, given that Oates's narrator has told her readers that Kathleen is incapable of holding two thoughts: "you could not maintain two thoughts simultaneously but grew weak and exhausted with the effort, and no effort was worth it" (28). Up until this point, "one thing [always] drove out another, earlier thing" (28). Oates's narrator uses gaps on the page to establish Kathleen's dissociative state during the self-inflicted abortion. One moment she imagines herself assisting at an operation with a surgeon, a "scrub nurse, nurse's aides" (113) all present, performing the ten-minute pre-operative scrub, "her first surgical scrub but brisk, unhesitating..." (114). The next moment she is in her nurse's aide procedural mode, and seemingly fully aware of what she is about to do to her own body. All pieces of information in this abortion section are presented with the same lack of emotion, whether the remark is about the still-alive fetus she calls a "glowing gem" (114), or the characteristics of dead tissue: "Dead tissue is dark and infirm and does not bleed" (116). Kathleen is outside herself, unable to judge whether she is laughing, crying or mute as she goes about her

grisly task. She is in her hospital procedural mode, but she is not at the hospital:

"Pick up the brush touching only the back and not the bristles...scrub in a pattern"

(114).

Besides the visual gaps in the sentences Oates writes in this chapter, there are breaks in thought mingled with procedural instructions. Kathleen is unaware of whether she is crying, laughing or mute. She remembers that "all persons [are] understood to be contaminated" (113) while she performs the surgical scrub. The unemotional following of sterile procedures forms a stark contrast with an earlier glimpse of Kathleen experiencing some feelings about the fetus she is carrying. The abortion carries the same impact as a suicide would have. For Kathleen, killing someone who could love her is the most destructive, enraged act she can perform, and the narrator's harrowing description of each grisly step serves to amplify what is already the significant achievement of this novella - a detailed exploration of its subject's rage. In *The Rise Of Life On Earth*, Oates has created a character in which "actions speak louder than words" (61).

### III

## *Black Water: The Articulate Twin, A Uterine Fantasy*

*...the forgotten event ... that can be memorialized  
in a narrative of pain. (Hacking 214)*

In an interview published in the *Ohio Review* in 1973, Joyce Carol Oates was asked if she could “single out a particular artistic intent for her work.” She replied:

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) (55).<sup>40</sup>

Her 1992 novel, *Black Water*<sup>41</sup>, nominated for the Pulitzer prize in fiction, brilliantly accomplishes her intention of recording in fictional terms the outrage she felt when Senator Ted Kennedy, in the infamous 1969 Chappaquiddick Island incident, escaped from a submerged car after leaving Mary-Jo Kopechne to die.<sup>42</sup> By concentrating her two-part text entirely in the mind of the Kelly Kelleher, and

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<sup>40</sup>“Transformations of Self: An Interview With Joyce Carol Oates,” *Ohio Review* 15:1 (1973): 51-61.

<sup>41</sup>All page references to *Black Water* will appear in Parentheses after citations.

<sup>42</sup>In *Invisible Writer*, Oates’s biographer, Greg Johnson, quotes from Oates’s notes on her feelings around the incident. Oates writes that “it was an accident that, while drunk, he drove the car into the water, but it was no accident that he allowed his passenger to drown. Imagine - he didn’t report the incident for nine hours. Yet he wasn’t charged with anything but leaving the scene” (383). Chappaquiddick is an island off the coast of Massachusetts.

recreating the two hours she is trapped in the car before she actually drowns,<sup>43</sup> Oates places the focus of her novel on the dangers an innocent and idealistic young woman encounters when she enters the maelstrom of politics, power and sex that swirls around an idealized political figure. By choosing a situation in which an extreme power imbalance exists between the two central characters, Kelly Kelleher and the unnamed, iconic Senator, Oates's narrator demonstrates that political, sexual and love relationships involve the same "negotiating of power" (53); she emphasizes her belief in Thomas Mann's dictum that "there *is* nothing not political" (91).

Oates's narrator in *Black Water* stresses that innocence can be a terrible thing in vulnerable young women in America. People like Kelly have not chosen their lives; they simply believe they have. The narrator stresses that *All-American Girls* like Kelly lack the judgement they need to protect themselves in the real world. Kelly Kelleher, Oates's Kopechne-like character, dies because she still believes in the American dream; she still has faith in the fairy tales and maxims she has imbibed growing up. As "*an American girl you want to look your best and give your ALL*" (52). Kelly's passivity, learned as a female in American society kills her. The narrator employs a separate voice, an italicized little-girl voice to show this: "Mommy, Daddy, hey I love you. You know that I hope. Please don't let me die. I love you, okay?" (59). Oates's narrator uses a small, mocking voice in

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<sup>43</sup>According to Johnson, *Black Water* was "designed to be read in two hours: exactly the length of time her heroine, Kelly Kelleher, stays alive" (383).

Kelly's head to demonstrate that her sense of independence and control with the Senator is a sham. "Am I ready? ready? ready?" (59) the voice mocks - ready for sex, for birth, for death. There is no more life for Kelly because she is a real American girl, mired in fashion magazines, following pop advice columns about relationships. There is no real life for Kelly to live when life is viewed in terms of America's insistence on power. Kelly is a graduate of Brown University, yet clings to the notion of a strong, articulate male rescuer until the final seconds of her life. She denies to the end that the Senator has abandoned her: "He had not kicked her. He had not fled from her. He had not forgotten her"(144). There is an almost unbearable poignancy in Oates's portrait of the trapped and doomed Kelly Kelleher struggling mentally to remain agreeable and cheerful while she gasps for breath, striving to believe that the Senator will return to rescue her up until the moment she loses consciousness. The American dream has given Kelly nothing but meaningless jingles to take with her to her watery grave.

The fragments of dissociated voice create the narrative structure of the novel. The constant switching from narrative to personal voice, the interplay among Kelly's fragmented voices makes the text exceptionally compelling. The confusion, contradiction, and at times simultaneous buzzing of voices replaying memories, making future plans, registering the seriousness of the present situation, accurately reveal the workings of the brain in a life-threatening situation. To have a neat narrative threading of incidents would betray the reality Oates is trying to present in this text. The authorial narration in the text has a sharp, ironic edge that

forms a dissociative-like structure for the novel. The narration is knowing, factual. When it describes the verdant or stunted landscapes of the island, it is like a voice from a travelogue; when it lists the slogans and phrases that come from media, family and church, the narration takes on the timbre of a replayed tape recording.

The narrator makes it clear from page one and the car's "giddy, skidding slides" into the murky water off the coast that no person, not even the narrator, is in charge of the events that will follow. The rambling opening sentence begins using the passive voice, shifts to past tense, and ends with the present action of a "rapidly sinking" (3) car. As the passenger's side goes underwater, an incredulous voice asks: "*Am I going to die - like this?*" (3). This is the voice of Kelly Kelleher, her intelligence intact, observing the severity of the situation and asking questions which become more and more urgent as the last two hours of her life elapse. The voice is always in italics; it speaks despite what is happening to her body; it is a dissociated part of Kelly's mind. This voice is also blunt and tells the truth. At times it is the "part of her brain that remained pragmatic, pitiless" (77). When other parts of her brain remember more promising times, this voice says, "*You're no longer an optimist, you're dead*" (29). At times this voice is Kelly's life force. It urges her to live even when it is fast becoming impossible: "a blood-flecked froth in her nostrils, her eyes rolling back in her head, *but she would fight*" (144). There is a third fragmented voice internalized in Kelly. It does not speak inside Kelly's head, but it is the doppelganger with whom she struggles in the surface narrative, the Senator. Kelly, as all healthy individuals, needs a senatorial fragment in her

personality - a voice that can speak powerfully and articulately; a voice that can protect her vulnerable fragments. The whole notion of a senator is a person who understands how to get heard. Having a voice is a necessary component of adult independence. A senator fragment could defend against Kelly's vulnerability. It would understand the politics of the world, and the need to speak out. The need for a senatorial voice applies to the compromised fetus who struggles to survive, to the already delivered fetus who can use his or her voice for ethical causes or personal gain, to the author who engages the world through words to the United States, whose independence is contingent on its maintaining power.

The observing voice is not the only voice of Kelly's in the novel. Another fragment keeps her memories of her grandparents and her father and mother intact. This voice is warm, nostalgic. Kelly is always engaged with this voice, assuring her parents that she is still a good girl, that she has done all the things they wished her to do. Fearing that her death will kill her grandmother, this voice negotiates with her mother to keep silent about it: "*Mommy, you see my point don't you?- okay? Daddy? Okay?*" (120). She tries to "hide her tears, not wanting them to be upset. Not wanting them to know" (151). This voice allows Kelly to survive her harrowing final two hours in the car. It replays memories and makes plans for the future. This fragment holds exciting memories from earlier in the day - the grand party at the lavish seaside home of her friend Buffy St. John, her success at attracting the Senator, the Independence Day celebration. It also contains emotional and visual snapshots of early childhood incidents and her unresolved

conflicts with her parents. All these voices help Kelly reconstruct her life while observing the tragedy that is occurring to her. Because she is dissociated, she is able to view her suffering from a distance. The dissociated Kelly plans on making this incident into a story with which she can entertain her friends at future social events, a vignette for her cocktail party repertoire. This voice speaks excitedly of how the story will garner interest even as her blunt and pragmatic voice registers that it is too late.

Oates's text is meticulously planned and executed. In *Black Water* a metaphor for the birth process parallels the fact-based drowning incident in the text. It is by far a more intricate and compelling story than the surface narrative. The Senator and Kelly are two fetuses struggling to be born. The Senator, "one of the immune...one of the most powerful adults of the world," (61) saves himself by squeezing through the partly opened window of the Toyota. Metaphorically, he pushes himself through the birth canal, escaping the "black muck" (64) or meconium in the womb that still surrounds and threatens to choke Kelly. The Senator is delivered to the shore immediately.

The Senator moaning...extricating himself by sheer strength forcing himself through the door, opening the door against the weight of black gravity...his foot...crushing upon her striking the side of her head...(65)

He lies on shore "exhausted vomiting the filthy water," but alive, born into the world (144). The other fetus does not have the power to negotiate the birth canal so easily. It is wedged in a corner of the car-womb, upside down. She is upside down and held tight - "[W]hat held her tight? A band? Several bands?" (46) -

perhaps the umbilical cord wrapped tightly around her neck. Something has gone terribly wrong and the baby will be a breach birth - "that door so strangely where it should not have been...as if the very earth had tilted insanely on its axis" (64).

Oates's narrative concern in the remainder of the text is the struggle of this fetus - Kelly Kelleher in the surface narrative - for air in the overturned car. Instinct for self-preservation makes her search frantically for air bubbles to keep herself alive. She is terrified that she will drown because the Senator has made a small fissure in the bone on her head when he crushed it with his foot as he was leaving the womb. She fears that through that crack "black water would pour to extinguish her life" (77); the "part of her brain that remained pragmatic, pitiless" (77) knows that the water will inevitably rise through "myriad holes, fissures, cracks like the webbed cracks in the windshield" (77).

Whether Kelly is viewed as an adult or a fetus, she lacks the ability to save herself. As a fetus she can make no movements to engage herself in the birth canal. Medically speaking she needs to be rescued by outside hands, by a caesarian section. As a female, her inability to act on her own behalf has been learned through a lifetime of conditioning. She has seen her mother silenced by her father's controlling personality. She has understood that she is Daddy's special little girl, that she will always be rescued as long as she is compliant and looks pretty. Kelly Kelleher dies in the overturned Toyota, hallucinating a rescue by the Senator with the last remaining oxygen in her lungs. On the metaphorical level, however, this final vision offers some hope that the fetus trapped in the womb might indeed be

set free as an independent being; this second fetus *might* be born. In her last moment of consciousness, Kelly, the unborn, sees the Senator “wrench open the door at last, the very door that had trapped her” (153). She goes through the door and when she surfaces, she swims alone. “Now she was free... she bore herself triumphantly to the air above at last!” (153).

When the text is considered as a re-creation of the Chappaquiddick incident, it is, of course, certain that Kelly drowns. The last line of the text, “as the black water filled her lungs, and she died,” has been frequently quoted in the novel. On the previous occasions in the text when this line is used, Oates’s narrator shows Kelly’s mind continuing to work by replaying memories and planning for the future. When all Kelly’s oxygen is depleted at the conclusion of the text, the replaying stops. In the surface drowning narrative, Kelly’s diminished air supply produces her final, triumphant fantasy of safely reaching the shore; in the labour and delivery subtext, the fetus is “hauled up out of the black water at last!” (153) where it can move and breathe effortlessly in the splendid world into which it has been born. The fetal subtext is an optimistic play on July 4, U.S. Independence Day, the day on which the novel is set.

The novel containing thirty-two sequentially numbered chapters, is divided into two parts. From the opening two-sentence chapter, Oates intertwines the Chappaquiddick narrative with the compelling birth metaphor. Oates takes the reader from “impatient exuberance” (3) in anticipation of some upcoming event - sex with the Senator, the delivery of twins, or death - to the sudden trauma of

being sucked into a black abyss. The rushing black sea water rapidly engulfs the Toyota the Senator is driving; there is a sudden change during labour in the fluid surrounding the fetuses in the amniotic fluid; a writer is pulled into the stream of her imagination, sucked into a whirling vortex of thoughts and ideas over which she has little control. The second sentence in chapter one is a question, concise and pregnant with meaning: “*Am I going to die?*” it asks. This is Kelly’s pragmatic voice, questioning the inevitable; it is the imaginary voice of a fetus preparing to enter the birth canal; it is the writer giving up conscious control of her imagination. But, after one reads the text this question is revealed as even more layered and complex.. In *Black Water*, there is a confusion of associations between birth, sex and dying, just as there was a similar confusion among the notions of suicide, sex and birth in *I Lock the Door Upon Myself*.<sup>43</sup> Kelly may view having sex with the Senator as a way of extinguishing herself. By merging herself with a political icon, she can become someone different. Kelly wants to be approved of by her father. She transfers this wish to the Senator when she first meets him. Her wish for approval becomes a conscious wish to have sex with the Senator because that would mean she had truly been noticed; her unconscious wish is to have sex with her father, the man she idolizes. Kelly has learned as a young child that to please her father she must obey him; when the Senator asks her to accompany him, Kelly

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<sup>43</sup>My discussion of these confused associations in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* was premised on an article by Dr. Ernest Jones, “An Unusual Case of Dying Together,” in *Psycho-Myth, Psycho-History: Essays in Psychoanalysis Vol. I* (New York: Hillston, 1974).

does not see that she can refuse to go because that would mean displeasing her father and she is Daddy's little girl.

The second chapter, a mere two pages, establishes the two landscapes of the text. One is a wealthy area by the sunny beaches, where the Independence Day party is taking place. The atmosphere there is expectant, celebratory; the guests await dark and the fireworks that will celebrate the holiday. The narrator fills out the picture of this landscape in fragments scattered throughout the text, as Kelly's memory floats back to that lush scene. This landscape in that wealthy section of Grayling Island is verdant. All in nature seems ripe, at the peak of its growth. The fruit of the bushes have a "blood-swollen ready-to-burst look to them" (121). The scent of wild roses combines with the "chill, fresh, stinging smell" (8) of the Atlantic; the waves are part of a world "so beautiful you want to sink your teeth into it" (101). The second landscape established in chapter two is the mirror opposite of the first. It begins "at the apogee of a hairpin curve" (9) similar in shape to the birth canal into which the fetus descends in preparation for delivery. This is the point in the text where, metaphorically speaking, "the picture flies out of the frame" (5). Death presides here. "The area is desolate, unpopulated...somewhere in the marshlands...dreamlike swamplands...now alive, reaching up to devour them" (5-6). The land gives off a "powerful, brackish, marshland odor, the odor of damp and decay" (8). Even the horizon offers no hope. There are "stunted trees and vines on the farther shore" (9). The water the Senator and Kelly enter is as "black as muck and smelling of raw sewage" (9). The

sound of insects copulating and dying as the car enters the water strike an ominous note about the outcome of the birth event. The change of the colour and smell of the water into which they plunge signals physical changes inside the womb. The Senator escapes immediately, but Kelly's struggle is to stay alive in this place. And it is only that part of her brain that remembers and creates that prevents her from giving up and dying immediately.

In the third chapter, a mere half page in length, Oates's narrator establishes that Kelly Kelleher, a single, Ivy-league-educated graduate, is unable to make her own decisions, or to speak for herself in the presence of a male more elevated than she is in power, position or age. She is unable to confide in her friend Buffy that she is leaving the party because the Senator *insists*, "[b]ecause if I don't do as he asks there won't be any later" (7). Oates underlines the power imbalance between the middle-aged Senator, whose charismatic gaze can easily subjugate the will of a young, idealistic woman. Kelly Kelleher is only in her twenties, still developmentally struggling to free herself from an internalized necessity to please her parents. The Senator is portrayed by Oates's narrator as a man accustomed to preying on young women. The Senator's power is centred in his enormous tongue, articulate and convincing, soothing and sexual, large and probing, like an engorged penis. In the text and in the world, those who can speak have power. The ironic tone of the work is firmly established in this short chapter as Kelly, silently capitulating to the Senator's wishes, is deprived of her entire future.

Chapter four focuses on the birth process that is central to the text. It uses

details about the landscape to set up the metaphor of something in a birth process going wrong. The chapter establishes that the process of delivery, inevitable and unstoppable, has begun. The idea of labour and birth works on a multitude of levels: re-birth or death of a country, labour to give birth to twins, Kelly's labour to stay alive by dissociating from her body so she can endure in the small pocket of space where she is pinned underwater. The narrator describes Kelly's experience of dissociation as "[p]atches of amnesia like white paint spill[ing] into her brain" (10). A disembodied voice asks, "*Am I going to die - like this?*" (3). The narrator states that now the fate of her "physical body [is] out of control of her brain , she [has]...no coherent perception of what in fact [is] happening" (10). The statement refers first to Kelly in the submerged car, but it can as easily be applied to a myriad of uncontrollable events in a country, or the onset of labour contractions.

The narrator adds two more complex explorations that comment on the original story and also stand on their own. Both explorations make use of dissociation. In the text, Kelly's brain continues to operate wholly dissociated from the condition of her body and the pain she is experiencing. Memories of her parents, young and old, arguments with her mother, shared experiences with her Grandma and Grandpa Ross,<sup>44</sup> replay as she tries to show both that she has been a good girl, and at the same time to assert her independence before she dies. These

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<sup>44</sup>The surname of Kelly's grandparents is the same as that of Betsy Ross, who, legend had it, was the first maker of the American flag. According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, Elizabeth Griscom Ross, was known to have made flags during the revolution. Her family continued to make flags for some time after it. "The long-accepted story that she designed and made the first American national flag, the Stars and Stripes, is now generally discredited," the encyclopedia states.

memories that engage her mind and force her to concentrate on matters outside her immediate situation are played off by the narrator against the pragmatic, italicized second voice in Kelly's mind. This voice does not block reality, but given the situation Kelly is in, neither is it of any help. The voice is continually asking questions, begging for help. It is the voice of a person who, from the first page, sees the situation as it is - "*Am I going to die - like this?*" (3). When this part of Kelly is dominant, she knows the truth. For example, she knows that she has only one chance to go with the Senator (115). This part asks "*Am I ready?*" - Ready to have sex with the Senator, ready to die. She cries out to be rescued: "*I'm here. I'm here. Here!*" (124). This second voice, however, is hampered by the impossibility of Kelly freeing her body. At the end of the text, this voice of Kelly's accepts the romantic picture of her being saved by the Senator just to gain her independence, even if that means death. She gives "herself up to him so his strong fingers could close about her wrists and haul her up out of the black water at last!" (153). In death, she frees her hands from the Senator's, "slipped free of his hands like a defiant child eager to swim by herself now she was free" (153).

As Kelly's memories play out during her last two hours of life, Oates's narrator introduces the reader to the complex of unresolved feelings Kelly Kelleher has around power, politics and her father, Artie Kelleher, a highly successful businessman. The father from whom she seeks approval is a conservative patriarch. He has subjugated his wife to such an extent that she trembles when she has to

approach him with a request.<sup>45</sup> Artie is the dominant presence in the Kelleher household. He is a controlling person. “One thing Artie didn’t appreciate was a passenger fiddling with his dashboard as he drove” (30).<sup>46</sup> Although Kelly vociferously argues with her father about his political views, everything she does is in reaction to him, a bid to win his admiration. Through her father, Kelly has been imbued with the very conservative attitudes she so adamantly rejects. This is evident when Kelly is teaching illiterate black students in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Like her father, she unconsciously retains a sense of superiority. She feels “chosen” when she gets invited to elite parties given at the summer retreats of the rich and powerful. Her confused feelings about her father are triggered when she meets the Senator because he and her father, although opposites in their political loyalties, share a similar social background.

[H]e too had gone to Andover just after Arthur Kelleher had graduated, then he’d gone to Harvard for both his B.A. and his law degree and Arthur Kelleher had gone to Amherst and then to Columbia and very likely the Senator and the Kellehers knew many people in common (57).

Being chosen by the Senator is rooted in Kelly’s unfulfilled desire to be chosen by her father, to be “*The One*.” When the Senator places his “soft damp

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<sup>45</sup>Mrs. Kelleher tells her daughter:

“When you were born and I knew you were a girl and I was never so happy in my life before, or since, I vowed I would never let my daughter be hurt as I have been hurt, and I will give my life for her, I swear to you God!” (118).

But Mrs. Kelleher is not a good model because her daughter wants to make her own choices, and so Iris rejects her mother’s way of life and attempts to emulate her father.

<sup>46</sup>Kelly is trapped by the crumpled dashboard of the Toyota. It restricts her movement and is the cause of her death. The dashboard contains the controls of the car. Kelly has not had access to these controls either with her father or with the Senator. This lack of control kills her.

touch” (58) on her bare shoulder, the “shimmering” feeling she experiences makes her feel special in exactly the same way she had always yearned to feel special to her father: “*You know you’re someone’s little girl, oh yes!*” (58). Kelly tries to be the “*All-American Girl*” to win her father’s approval. The narrator, however, views “*The All-American Girl*” as a harmful myth, and treats events associated with it with deep and bitter irony throughout the text. The tone indicates that the narrator holds a money-driven market responsible for convincing women to believe in the myth. Advertising teaches young females to confuse love with fashion magazine articles on romance. When the Senator kisses her on the beach, Kelly immediately reconfigures it in her mind as a piece of advertising copy suitable for a perfume ad:

Gripping her shoulders bare beneath the crocheted tunic with his strong fingers and kissing her full on the mouth as the wind blew caressingly about them like a palpable tactile substance wrapping them together, binding (54).

The fact that she has written her senior thesis on the Senator’s use of “Jeffersonian Idealism and ‘New Deal’ Pragmatism” is of no use now to the slightly drunk, always-wanting-to-please Kelly. She is incapable of making a rational decision. She can only see the Senator as an idealized male figure. To Kelly, the Senator is a perfect male archetype - tall and bronzed, like a statue, hairy-armed, solid, muscular” (150). The part of her brain that recognizes him for what he truly is - middle-aged, drunk, dissolute - is in suspension, and only surfaces once in the text: then she sees him as “an exhausted middle-aged man

beginning to go soft in the gut” (90). But now, in his presence at this party on Grayling Island, Maine, she feels “chosen” (40). Her brain is loosened by liquor (57), so she discusses with ease all the current topics:

the outrage of the recent Supreme Court decisions, the ideologically sanctioned selfishness and cruelty of a wealthy society, how systematic the gains of the civil rights movement, the retirement of Justice Thurgood Marshall, the end of an era (82-83).

Twinning, double images, and doppelgangers play a prominent thematic role in *Black Water*. The text may have sprung from Oates’s moral convictions about the unpunished behaviour of politicians in America, but within the political metaphor it contains a deeply personal statement that reflects Oates’s having a “peculiar version of the doppelganger” in her own life ( Johnson 363). Oates has a severely autistic sister, Lynn, born June 16, 1956 on Oates’s eighteenth birthday (88). The two, according to Johnson, were “intellectual opposites, but shared a striking resemblance much closer than that between most siblings” (363). In *Black Water*, the fictional interplay of the articulate Senator and the shy Kelly Kelleher, unable to speak on her own behalf, mirrors the tragic situation Oates had in her own family. In the text the fetus who is the first born and the stronger of the two fetuses could be an image of the author. Oates is the first born and the articulate sibling in her family. She is as articulate in her writing as the Senator is in his role as a public speaker. The second fetus, in trouble even before it lets go into the birth canal, has no voice, but a brain that functions, like her own sister. The analogy cannot be substantiated because the text ends just as Kelly, with no more

air to breathe, releases herself into death. In the same way a fetus with no more room to move could finally enter the birth canal. This metaphorical thread in the text extends no further.. There may be two births - one representing Oates, the other her sister. The second birth might also be the creative product of the author's labour, one very different from what she had expected. According to Johnson,<sup>47</sup> when Oates was writing *Black Water*, she experienced a feeling of "delirious immersion" (382) in the story. After completing the text, she stated that what she had produced was "very different from - the Chappaquiddick incident (383). On July 7, 1991, she wrote to Johnson that she felt as if she had "just emerged from a sustained horror/trauma.... (383). This information bolsters the theory that this text is , at its deepest level, about something other than Chappaquiddick and the misuse of power.

There is another twin story in the text of *Black Water*. Kelly remembers having intervened with a schoolmate named Lisa to prevent the latter's suicide attempt. Lisa, according to the text, was a twin, and Kelly became fascinated with this fact and the information that the two had attempted to kill themselves in a suicide pact three years earlier.

"There isn't that much difference between people, and there isn't that much *purpose* to people," Lisa was saying in a flat, nasal, bemused, bullying voice, "-if you're one-half of a twin set you *know*" (113).

Kelly exhibits a deep connection with Lisa after her suicide attempt and has great

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<sup>47</sup>Oates's biographer states that she began writing *Black Water* while taking notes for the longer and more involved novel, *What I Lived For*, published in 1994.

difficulty establishing boundaries between Lisa and herself. Oates's narrator uses italics to show the separate, practical voice she calls on within herself to contend with her fascination with suicide. Kelly confronts the fragment of herself who wants to merge with Lisa, "I am not your sister, I am not your twin, I am not you" (113). Even at the conclusion of the text, when Kelly remembers herself as a little girl with her grandparents, she remembers herself as Liza-Beth. She has a permanent connection with the suicidal girl and this fact is reflected in her decision to get into the Toyota with the inebriated Senator.

The idea of double images is also played out in the text by Oates's frequent emphasis on problems Kelly has with her sight. Oates uses the idea of sight on two levels: a failure in visual perception, and a failure in judgement. First is the "imbalance in her eye muscles" (21). In the first two years of her life, the narrator tells us, Kelly saw "not a single image...but two images (each further confused by a multiplicity of details unharmoniously and always unpredictably overlapping, the left eye image always floating about unmoored)" (22-23). Kelly's judgement is also frequently alluded to. Kelly, unlike her friend Buffy St. John, does not "see" or understand what politics is really about - she merely registers the surface. When Kelly was in a relationship with G\_ before meeting the Senator, she had been unable to see that he was treating her badly. When Kelly is submerged in the car, she physically lacks sight because of the black water; for the two hours she remains alive before drowning, most of her mind refuses to see what is happening, but this keeps her alive.

Kelly finds the strength to say no to death as long as possible by employing that part of her consciousness that remembers and is imaginative. To each of the interspersed questions and comments that comes from the realist's voice, her imagination and memory answer unswervingly "No," until it is no longer possible for her brain to get oxygen. Even that final letting go is a comforting image of the Senator as she would like him to be. Her parting into death is a profoundly beautiful slipping into wholeness and independence. Underlying Oates's use of the two voices, there is a clear message that reality must be acknowledged because it can kill you, but that imagination and memory will offer sustenance when one experiences trauma.

*Black Water* demonstrates, more starkly than any other text discussed in this thesis, the mind operating despite the body, constantly reformulating a narrative of the future, even while dying. The workings of the human mind, the stored images and aural memories, fuel the will and bring hope. The text demonstrates that every life, no matter how hurt or small, is comprised of a set of memories that is replayed as comfort when the body is traumatized. These memories form a map of the connections Kelly clings to as she dies, and from which she gets her hope for rescue. Growing up in the comfortable womb of a well-off family, protected by a prominent and powerful father, Kelly learns early in life that as one of the chosen, she will always be taken care of and rescued. Now, in the submerged car, "snug as any womb" (80), she relies on getting the same treatment she received in her family - and she dies. What she lacks is the ability to

separate from the womb, to be born into the complexity of real life where reason must sometimes take precedence over emotion, where males are not idealized.

The pictures that recur in the text are few but powerful. Foremost are images of her relationships with her father, her mother and her grandmother. The father from whom she seeks approval has imbued Elizabeth Ann Kelleher with conservative attitudes, although Kelly “angrily rejects [the] save your white skin position” (56) her father takes. Kelly’s relationship with her mother is uncomfortable because the latter neither understands nor respects the mores of her daughter’s world. “[T]he appearance of impropriety, the appearance of extramarital scandal” (133) that preoccupies Mrs. Kelleher are attitudes Kelly argues against throughout the text. “It’s a changed world from the one you knew, mother. I wish you would accept that. I wish you would let me alone!” (133). Kelly rebels against her mother’s attempts to protect her from being hurt by powerful men and by sex. Kelly is in fetal distress throughout the text. It is difficult for her to breathe. The Senator, however, extricates himself from the womb, “and with fanatic strength forces himself through the door” (64) of the dilated opening. He arrives on shore, “drenched and shivering ” as any newborn. He is holding a “coin in his stiff fingers like a magic talisman, [there is a] wallet snug in his pocket, and [his] money is intact” (146). He is equipped to leave and to be independent. The Senator is Oates’s stronger half.

## Chapter Four

### *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang: A Portrait of Power and Rage*

*One way to stop being a sex object is to adopt an alternative gender role.*

(Hacking 78)

Joyce Carol Oates's 1993 novel, *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*,<sup>48</sup> reinvents the gang culture of the 1950s and visualizes it as an independent female entity. The activities of FOXFIRE<sup>49</sup> take place in Hammond, a small industrial city in upstate New York. Like Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha, Hammond is a familiar location for Oates's texts, a place that contains all the cultural phenomena of America, including gangs. The site is redolent with suggestions of corruption.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>All page references to *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* will appear in parentheses after citations.

<sup>49</sup>In *Foxfire*, all references to the gang appear in capital letters. Only the first letter of the Foxfire gang will be capitalized in this thesis so that the visual flow of the text will not be interrupted.

<sup>50</sup>John Crowley, in his August 15, 1993 review of *Foxfire* for the *New York Times Book Review*, states that the text of *Foxfire* is an exercise in "myth creation" (*NYTBR* 6). He says that Oates makes Hammond:

"as grim and fraught, as suitable for such a tale, as any blasted heath or barren sierra; it is populated by a touching and brave band of warriors and by loathsome villains made to taste justice. There is even a hermit priest encountered in the waste, who gives spiritual advice." (6).

Hammond sits on a river which “gives off a brackish smell as of floating garbage, the rotting corpses of fish, untreated sewage” (*Foxfire* 72). The narrator, fifty-year-old Madelaine Faith Wirtz, draws a picture of Hammond and its inhabitants that is stark and relentlessly uncomfortable because it is filtered through the lenses of its disadvantaged and marginalized young residents. All her life, Madelaine Faith Wirtz, or Maddy as she was called in her Foxfire gang days, has been “perceived as having the power of words” (5). She has two distinct voices in the text - one as an acerbic-tongued adolescent and the other as a fifty-year-old scientist, piecing together the activities of the Foxfire gang. Although the entire text is filtered through the voice of the New Mexican resident Madelaine, her sharply observant adolescent voice is more compelling in the novel. Maddy, alias Maddy Monkey, or Killer as she was known in her youth, records in her chronicle that members of the Foxfire gang did not view themselves as part of God’s “special creation” (6), living as they did with “a long steep hill cutting approximately half the city off from the other half” (8), dividing it into uptown and lower town:

We didn’t belong, here at the shabby south end of Hammond in the worst damn public school in the district, we didn’t belong and never would” (6-7).

The people she describes are the outsiders of Fairfax Avenue. For the ghettoised young women, “[t]he long steep hill to Lower town...[is] all they know of home” (186). When the two founding members of Foxfire are first shown together in the text, the narrator stresses their lower-class roots. Margaret Ann Sadovsky, alias

Legs, huddles with Maddy Wirtz. They form the gang while eating food that reflects their socio-economic status.

A hunk of meatloaf...coagulated with a lacy film of grease, some cold mashed potatoes in a Tupperware bowl, slices of Kraft American cheese and Wonder Bread and a Hostess cupcake we shared and a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer we shared too as Legs chewed, and swallowed, and smiled, and talked" (14).

Socio-economic status is not the only influence that shapes the Foxfire girls, however. All gang members come from fractured and dysfunctional family units. Fathers are glaringly absent, with the exception of Legs's father, Ab Sadovsky. His severe alcoholism and brutal public betrayals of Legs are more damaging to her life than Maddy's father's death in the Second World War is to her. Mothers in the text are ill, abusive, ineffective, absent or dead. Growing up without nurturing parents, the girls have no one to represent their interests. As a result, they develop hard shells to protect themselves emotionally. Their feelings of self-esteem, already damaged by inadequate or non-existent parenting, are further affected when they see their shortfalls reflected back to them daily by the insiders of Hammond, who treat them with pity or disdain. The Foxfire girls may be citizens of Hammond, but they have no social currency.

In *Foxfire*, Oates cross-fertilizes the visionary character, Legs Sadovsky, with the intellectually gifted writer Maddy, and produces a startling vision of how women can use power. The Foxfire gang is born in chapter two of Part One of the text. The tunnel-like window opening into Maddy's small room, the aperture through which Legs pushes her wet body, suggests a fetus pushing through the

birth canal to the warmth and safety of a birthing room's receiving blankets. The scene is a conception as well as a birth, however. Legs Sadovsky enters the text in chapter two dressed like a male. Even in her exhausted state, Legs brings an enormous amount of energy into the room. She is like "a powerful stallion all hooves, flying mane, tail, snorting and steamy-breathed" (10). This first picture of Legs is mythic in its proportions. She is like "[S]heena' flying through the jungle...*a blind creature* with perfect spatial memory" (11). When the visionary Legs gets between the bed covers with Maddy, an immediate intimacy is formed between the two, but the sparks are intellectual and not sexual. Legs entrances the insecure Maddy by her fast-talking, posturing and bravado. During these first few hours, she steals Maddy's heart emotionally. It takes thirty-seven years and the entire text of *Foxfire* for the narrator of the Confessions to reclaim her heart fully. In retrospect, Madelaine views union of the two virtual orphans as the vehicle by which Legs can find a voice for her unspoken ideas and she herself the impetus to create a chronicle. The union of Legs and Maddy in chapter two results in *Foxfire*, an independent girl gang, and an entity virtually unheard of in the 1950s. The *Foxfire* gang empowers Maddy and Legs and the other disadvantaged girls who are admitted to the group; it gives all its members something they sorely lack - the feeling of belonging to a family.

Forming an independent girl gang is an act of revolutionary proportions for the 1950s. The narrator's continual emphasis on "truth" in *Foxfire* makes the reader question whether such an entity really existed in that time period, or

whether Oates's narrative intention is to re-construct history fictionally by mapping the psychological underpinnings of an independent girls' gang, and the activities such an entity would likely engage in, *had* it existed. To sociologists in the literature of girls and gangs of that decade, the existence of a *completely* independent girl gang is a moot point, and the subject of academic discussion. This lack of agreement among academicians would normally have no direct bearing on a critical examination of a piece of fiction. It is important in *Foxfire*, however, because the dominant narrator, Madelaine continuously emphasizes the need to record what occurred in this gang in the 1950's lest the "truth" about this independent girl gang be lost forever.

In the decade of the 1950s, female groups were mostly adjuncts to male groups. They were present to perform minor criminal activities, and to provide sex for male members. Some of Oates's inspiration for *Foxfire* could have been based on two girl gangs of the 1950s and 1960s that, as Anne Campbell points out, were investigated by W.B. Miller in his article, "The Molls," (1973). "The Molls favored playing hooky, stealing, drinking, vandalism, sex and assault in that order" (20). Like the Molls, the Foxfire girls drank, vandalized property and assaulted people whom they deemed deserving of punishment, yet unlike the Molls, they refrained from sexual activity with boys, and did not try to curry favour with the local male gang.

A second model that might have contributed to Oates's portrait of the Foxfire gang was a group called the "Dagger Debs," a girl gang from Spanish

Harlem, which K. Hanson researched for *Rebel in the Streets: The Story of New York's Girl Gangs* (Campbell 18). These girls, though distinctly *unlike* the Foxfire girls in their sexual habits, did distinguish themselves by wearing a uniform of sorts. The Dagger Debs wore men's shirts, jeans and boots, and they wrapped their heads in red bandannas. The Foxfire girls also have distinguishing clothing and colours. An orange-red is the signifying colour of the gang - the colour of blood, the colour of the heart. Foxfire initiates wear a tattoo reddened with vegetable dye; Foxfire scarves are orange-red; Foxfire signs are painted in red. The girls all wear *black* corduroy jackets with the gang initials FXFR embroidered over one breast and, like the Dagger Debs, they eventually get a home of their own. For the Dagger Debs, home is the first floor of a house; for the Foxfire girls, it is an abandoned farmhouse.

Campbell finds one instance, roughly dated from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, when a member of the Mohawk Debs gang, like Legs, founds her own girl gang, The Persian Queens. This girl gang is only formed, however, after the male group to which they were an auxiliary "decided to decrease their street visibility [after a bout of street arrests]" (18). Journalist Robert Rice, however, in a 1963 article cited by Campbell, describes this same group, the Mohawks, as having a "parasitic quality" (17). Another girl gang famous for fighting was called the Famous Duchesses. One of the members whom Campbell mentions was a fearless tomboy who bears some resemblance to Legs. "When she fought, she fought to win" (18). Like Legs, she "almost always wore pants rather than a skirt"

(Campbell 18). These two examples could have contributed to Oates's model for the character Legs. The gang that Legs and Maddy form is not an adjunct gang, nor is it an entity acting on behalf of a higher male authority, however. Foxfire is based on a bond of trust among women. Members of the group are chaste. They may have male friends, but dating is forbidden. They are intolerant of any male victimization of their members. Their outrage as a group and their sympathy for indignities suffered in the past by fellow gang members heals their wounds, gives them a sense of empowerment and heightens their self-esteem. Membership in Foxfire provides a family structure. The gang's revenge activities are a public expression of their power.

The rite of becoming a Foxfire member is similar to that of entering a religious order. There is an initiation scene resembling a baptism early in the text. Legs, a cross hanging from her neck, dressed in black garb like a cleric, oversees the ritual in a room lit by five white candles, one for each member: Betty Siefried, alias "Goldie" or "Boom-Boom"; Elizabeth O'Hagan, alias "Rita" or "Red" or "Fireball"; Madelaine Faith Wirtz, alias "Maddy" or "Monkey" or "Killer"; Loretta Maguire, alias "Lana." The leader, Margaret Ann Sadovsky, alias "Legs" or "Sheena," requires no candle because she is the visionary who decides what the activities of the group will be. Besides the baptism into a group, the initiation scene also has the performance of a pagan Mass, wherein the blood of the girls is mixed after they drink whiskey and are tattooed by their leader.

Each initiate wears a cross to the ceremony. Legs greets the initiates

solemnly, "so seemingly reverent as if knowing this evening, this hour would change their lives forever" (36). Legs brings out "glasses and a bottle of whiskey and with priestly decorum she poured whiskey in the glasses" (39). Her voice is incantatory, hypnotic, transforming. The shabby little room the girls are crowded into becomes strange, "the room's verticals shifted and planes of light eased together and deepened. From somewhere came a glow of a candled egg enveloping them as if the veins of one coursed into the veins of the others" (39). The girls take an oath consecrating themselves "to the vision of Foxfire" (39). Legs's message is a hodgepodge of Biblical rhetoric, communist slogans and prayers. But it is the sound of her words, the musical cadences, the hypnotic repetitions that sways the girls. They promise "*never to betray...never to reveal...never to deny Foxfire*" (40); they offer their hearts and souls and happiness to the gang.

Legs presides, the priest, the orator, the "magician producing...an elegant silver ice pick" (40) to tattoo each girl in turn with the torch of Foxfire, "a tall erect flame," (41) a penis-like symbol of empowerment. Tattooing, like the loss of virginity, brings blood. In receiving a tattoo, each of the fatherless young women acknowledges Legs as her protector, her father-figure. The initiates, like priests at a con-celebrated mass, mingle not water and wine but their own blood with that of the others. As they rub against one another in hypnotic, drunken delight, the sombreness of the ritual abruptly changes. Goldie

now br[eaks] loose, hugging the others one by one to smear her blood

against theirs her braying laughter rising and contagious so suddenly they were all laughing shrilly, breathlessly (41).

Legs's pseudo-religious ritual becomes a scene of joyful eroticism. The Foxfire members grapple and tear at each other's shirts; they rub their bare breasts together. Chaste Legs does not actively participate in the erotic activities of the celebration, nor does she stop them. This part of the initiation is full of joy. It marks the official beginning of the Foxfire family; the initiates' joyful actions are an expression of love.

After the tattooing ceremony, Legs gradually acquires emblems for the gang members which link them publicly - scarves, jackets, a car. Legs mysteriously finds the means to buy beautiful orange-red scarves. Next she provides black corduroy jackets with the initials FXFR embroidered over one breast, and later the gang car, named "Lightning Bolt," which Legs purchases from Acey Holman for \$225.00.<sup>51</sup> As the Foxfire members acquire these emblems, they feel comfortable excluding those who do not have the marks of belonging to their family. They distance themselves from non-members; sometimes they abruptly stop speaking as others approach.

Renting a decrepit old house as their own home outwardly marks their belief that they are a cohesive family unit. The house is the first real home any of them have had. Here they all contribute to the family good, even if achieving that

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<sup>51</sup>A cousin of Oates's, according to Greg Johnson, "owned a memorable two-door sedan he had fondly named 'Lightning Bolt.' The car had a cracked windshield and emitted poisonous clouds of exhaust" but it sported "glamorous red zigzag lightning arrows on its sides...pockmarked bumpers, no fenders, five-dollar tires,"(55) according to Oates.

perceived good involves criminal activity; here they feel unconditionally accepted for the first time. Like a real family, the Foxfire girls are bound together in love. They have the incredible luxury of their own mattresses and blankets. In time, they are so in rhythm with one another that they begin to menstruate simultaneously. But a home run by vision alone and supported by criminal activity, a home which lacks adult guidance and bans sexual relationships, is a home that cannot flourish, especially when all its members are lower-middle-class teenagers from fractured families. After a time, the Foxfire dream begins to shatter. Gang members quickly learn that money is "the wormy heart of civilization" (213). The Foxfire girls scrimp and save. They resort to posing as sexual bait to hook men whose money and valuables they then extort or steal. When they are at the house, they huddle at the heart of the shabby building near the warm furnace to discuss other ways to earn money.

The way the Foxfire gang operates demonstrates how Oates employs Jung's complex theory in the novel. According to Jung, a cluster of feelings, or affects which are the result of early trauma, forms a potent cluster of buried emotion. When any feeling contained in that cluster is triggered, a series of responses and actions is set in motion and reasoned thinking is bypassed. The result is swift, sometimes very dangerous action. As a group, the Foxfire girls act in response to specific emotional triggers, such as sexual abuse of any member. They take revenge on the math teacher, Mr. Buttinger, for victimizing Rita O'Hagan, or Maddy's Uncle Walt, (nicknamed Wimpy), for trying to extort sexual

favours from Maddy in return for a discarded typewriter, or Tyne's Pets and Supplies owner, Mr. Gifford, for maltreating the animals he has for sale. Later activities become even more extreme. Legs sets fire to a house in which a woman named Yetta is being sexually abused; gang members blackmail men whom they have lured into sexually compromising situations; they kidnap a wealthy man so that they can extort money from his family. Members of the Foxfire gang are able to unite on these issues and take revenge because each of them has suffered victimization and deprivation in her own life. The revenge activities reflect the hurt and anger of individual gang members. Their attempt to right the damage done to one member is the way each member seeks to repair her damaged self-esteem. At the start, their gang activities have positive results. With heightened self-esteem, the girls are less likely to become targets for predatory males. The gang activities provide the girls with peers who confirm the truth of their individual experiences and who acknowledge by their common anger and acts of revenge the damage such abuse does to all women. The group dynamic results in emotional catharsis for the abuses suffered by individual gang members precisely because it triggers public acts of revenge. The revenge actions also function as a healing mechanism both for the injured individual and the other gang members. Being able to respond in a public way gives the Foxfire girls feelings of self-esteem which were not appropriately internalized in their families of origin.

Gang members become completely immersed in their objective while engaging in revenge activities. Loosely speaking, they enter a kind of dissociative

state since each Foxfire girl suspends her individual will. Questions of the behavioural appropriateness, morality or criminality of their actions do not penetrate the trance-like state while they are engaged in revenge activities. By presenting dramatically the idea of how complexes function in *Foxfire*, Oates demonstrates the frightening results when reason is suppressed.

The novel traces two paths in the gang, one represented by Legs (Margaret Ann) Sadovsky, who remains dominated by the trajectory of hurt, anger and revenge until the end of the text, the other by Maddy Wirtz. Legs's path ends in her disappearance. Maddy's path is life-giving because she uses reason and moral conscience to break the hold emotions have over her. Legs brings the insane gang member VV with her; Maddy is "X-iled," temporarily dismissed from the gang. She leaves the circle of revenge along with Rita O'Hagan, the text's symbol of openness and fertility. The text describes in vivid detail the revenge Foxfire takes against men who abuse their positions of power and the escalation of those revenge activities to criminal actions as the unresolved complex of hurt, anger and revenge spins out of control. Rita O'Hagan's treatment by her Math teacher, Mr. Buttinger, triggers Foxfire's first act of revenge. While many of the teachers at the school treat Rita with disdain, Mr. Buttinger's actions are clearly abusive. He keeps Rita after school, usually alone, for "remedial" instruction. He sits beside her

uncomfortably close ...nudging against her even sometimes drawing his thick beefy hands against her breasts quickly and seemingly accidentally so she didn't know what was happening or how she might be to blame for it happening if it was....Mr. Buttinger never hurt her exactly. Nor threatened her. So she never ran away, wouldn't have had the courage to run away just

just walked home after the disciplinary session numbed and sobbing quietly to herself...(29).

The Foxfire girls act to destroy community respect for Mr. Buttinger by painting what he has done to his student in the crudest of words on the side of his car.<sup>52</sup>

The gang is elated when their plan is successful. Buttinger is publicly humiliated and forced to resign from his teaching position, and Foxfire girls understand that the form of their revenge - destroying Mr. Buttinger's position of respect in the community - has symbolically killed him.

The narrator, Madelaine, records all her early memories of Rita O'Hagan. This listing of prior abuses emphasizes that Rita's experience with Buttinger is only the most recent in a long line of traumatic experiences. Rita is the youngest of nine children, the daughter of a frightened, neglectful mother and a father "inclined to alcoholic binges of drinking and sporadic acts of violence" (26). Madelaine recalls four stories about the treatment the "strawberry blonde" (23) girl with the "American prettiness" (24) received at the hands of the neighbourhood boys. Whether their actions were cruel pranks, like drowning a kitten in front of her, or violent sexual transgressions at the Viscount's gang's clubhouse, Rita's clumsiness, plumpness, her "tears of utter helplessness were...her tormentor's reward" (24).

In Foxfire's second act of revenge, Maddy enters into a negotiation over

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<sup>52</sup>The words on the side of Mr. Buttinger's car are painted by the Foxfire girls in capital letters. The message reads:

"I AM NIGGER LIPS BUTTINGER IM A DIRTY OLD MAN MMMMMM GIRLS! I TEACH MATH & TICKLE TITS IM BUTTINGER I EAT PUSSY" (31).

On the rear of the car, FOXFIRE REVENGE! is painted in red letters.

the price of an old Underwood typewriter with a distant relative, Walter (Wimpy) Wirtz, a man known for "whistling at women in a jeering way" (63). Because he is an adult and a relative, Maddy is not suspicious of "Uncle" Wimpy, and so does not notice that he locks the door of his store and puts a "closed" sign in the window (68) when she is inside trying to negotiate a price for the typewriter. Wimpy offers the old Underwood to Maddy at a lower price if she is "a good girl" (69). He says this while bringing "her hand against the front of his trousers, against his bulging crotch" (69). Legs's sympathy for Maddy when she tells her what Uncle Wimpy did to her, and the rage of the other Foxfire members when they hear of her experience, mobilizes the gang for its second act of revenge, and helps Maddy deal with her pain:

and the misery of it, that man touching her as he had, oh Christ her touching him was eased from her as if it had never been (72).

There are indications early in this second act of revenge that the gang will later veer out of control. Rita, fresh from her victory over Buttinger, proposes that they kill Uncle Wimpy. "*Let's kill him! Let's kill all of them!*" (72). Later, alone with Maddy "in the dimly-lit cubbyhole at the rear of the store"(74), when Wimpy takes out his "vein-raddled, blood-swollen" (76) penis, the Foxfire gang jubilantly attack Wimpy "like young dogs eager for the kill" (76). But Maddy loses her taste for such brutal retaliation early in the attack. She is "[s]uddenly worried Wimpy Wirtz might have a heart attack or a stroke" (77), and tries in vain to stop her Foxfire sisters.

Legs bangs his head against the floor so hard his eyes shimmer out of focus, she's laughing, savage, infuriated...[t]here's Lana clawing like a tiger at the man's exposed flesh...there's ...Fireball O'Hagan pounding and squeezing...Boom-Boom squealing in delight, rising up high on her knees to come down hard on the man's chest (78).

When the attack is over and Wirtz lies "unresisting" (78) but still alive, Maddy has begun a crucial mental and emotional separation from her sisters in the gang.

Maddy feels pity for the suffering they have imposed on him even though she was the innocent victim of his sick mind in the first place.

Oates's narrator, Madelaine, uses the third act of revenge, the closing down of Tyne's Pet Shop, to illustrate the growing power of Foxfire presence in the neighbourhood. For the Foxfire girls, neglected by their families and on their own in the world, the poorly cared for caged animals represent the way they had seen themselves before joining Foxfire. In this vignette, gang members, wearing animal masks, picket the shop. By making the owner's cruel treatment of the animals public, the gang gains respect in the community and their picture appears in the local Hammond newspaper. The section seems to be lighter in tone than the other Foxfire revenge activities, with one significant exception. Maddy gets into a shouting match with the store owner and is shocked at her own capacity to embrace violence and make her own laws. Spontaneously, Maddy shouts: "If you don't respect living life you don't deserve to live yourself" (91).

The motif of caged animals in the Tyne incident forms a neat transition in Maddy's chronicle to the confrontation between Foxfire and the Viscounts that ends in Legs's imprisonment on charges of assault and reckless driving. It is the

only direct confrontation in the text between the Foxfire girls and their male counterparts. The incident between Legs and the Viscount leader, Vinnie Roper, begins when neither Legs nor Vinnie is present. Members of the two gangs trade insults on the high school grounds and the confrontation escalates. When anger on both sides reaches a fever pitch, Legs almost magically appears on the scene, her knife open at Vinnie Roper's throat. The trigger for Legs's instant response is hearing her gang member, Goldie, called a "cunt." Legs's complex of emotions around any woman being treated abusively is instantly triggered when she hears this.

The Viscounts contend that a Foxfire member, the beautiful Violet Kahn, has given a "false signal" (111) to Moon, one of their members. The Viscounts have advanced upon the members of the Foxfire gang, "steps springy...like a wolf pack" (111), edgy with anger. Lana calls the boys "assholes" (111), which infuriates the young men and draws them even closer. When Moon becomes verbally abusive to Lana, blunt-spoken Goldie Siefried springs to her defense - "You fuck off, cocksuckers" (111), she cries. The situation is ignited as if "a match had been tossed into a pool of gasoline" (111). And suddenly, out of nowhere, "there's Legs Sadovsky, a six-inch switchblade in her hand" (112). Legs's cool control establishes her "public victory" (113) over the Viscount leader, Vinnie Roper, until Morton Wall, the school principal, appears on the scene. Furious, he expels Legs, refusing to listen to any explanation of the events leading up to her action. Legs and Goldie get "high" from seeing the leader of a male gang back

down to them. Such a victory impedes Legs's judgement. When she and Goldie see Acey Holman's Buick Deluxe parked with its motor running outside a store, Legs reacts impulsively and "borrows" the car. After collecting other Foxfire members along the way, Legs takes the girls for a joy ride. When police give chase to the speeding vehicle, Foxfire "defies death...the Buick a vessel of screams as it lifts, floats...[landing]...like a hard-shelled insect on its back" (121). Miraculously, "nobody's dead" (123).

This wrong-headed excursion results in Legs and the Foxfire gang members being arrested and charged with a variety of infractions ranging from "consorting with 'dangerous companions,'" (130) to assault with a dangerous weapon and grand larceny. Six of the members, including Maddy, are given five months probation; Goldie receives a twelve-month probationary sentence; Legs is sentenced to Red Bank Correctional Institute For Girls for a minimum of five months for assault and theft of Acey Holman's car. Part Two ends with Legs's incarceration.

The transformation Legs undergoes in prison at the Red Bank Correctional Facility, the hooking activities of Foxfire and the gang's move into their own house are the subjects of Part Three of *Foxfire*. In prison, Legs's views on life and people are utterly transformed. Readers hear Legs's interior voice as imagined by Maddy in her chronicle. Maddy becomes Legs's heart while the latter is in prison. She records the conversations she thinks Legs would have had with her if she had been in prison too. The section combines the notations Maddy made in her journal three

decades ago with Madelaine's memories of what Legs had revealed to her about the experience. In Part Three, Madelaine shows Legs having dissociative episodes in prison. The fragmentation begins when she is at the police station. At first, it is only a sense of panic "that things were shifting out of control" (143). After the policemen "accidentally-on purpose touch her arm, her breast...[saying] sweetheart, which of them 'punks' do you put out for?- or is it all of them?" (144), Mrs. Siskin, the matron at the prison asks if the policemen had "done anything more than interrogate her when [she] wasn't in the room" (145). Legs, enraged, reacts instantly, saying, "I'd kill any bastard that laid his hands on me" (145), forgetting what actually had just occurred. After the mandatory body search, the requisite scrubbing for lice, Legs feels the first sensation of needing to dissociate from this prison experience to survive: "her scalp shivering like a shoal of tiny fish sensing danger and the need to flee" (147). In solitary confinement, what inmates call "the room," Legs comes close to a complete breakdown. Realizing that she cannot get out, "she shattered like a cheap clay pot" (151). She finds herself vulnerable to thoughts and emotions other than anger. Her facade appears to have broken. Legs moves between insanity and reason while in jail, but finally she discovers her inner voice: "there's a voice in my head that's calm almost like my own but grownup & its saying O.K. *but you're alive* so I think *My God, yes - I'm alive*" (152). She develops a special bond with the other inmates in prison. "*You can't not know they're your sisters too...just like me just like my Foxfire sisters*" (154). The calm voice, however, does not obliterate Legs's rage complex. This

constellation of emotions surfaces when her father, Ab, visits her. Knowing how much it will hurt Legs, he tells her that when she was *in utero* her mother had wanted to abort her; that her mother was a promiscuous woman, that it is entirely possible that he might not even be her father. Legs's emotional response to this revelation is so intense that prison guards bring her back to "the room." On the way, a female guard cruelly thumbs her eye, ostensibly to quell her hysteria, leaving her with a red mark on the iris and permanently flawed vision. This detail presages the lack of judgement Legs will show in her decision-making later in the text.

In chapter six, Part Three, "Hawks," Oates creates a brilliant poetic image of Legs's emotional vulnerability while she is isolated from her other inmates in solitary confinement. Legs discovers that she cannot tolerate being alone or incarcerated. The only way she keeps herself sane is by counting the hawks circling in the sky and identifying with them. Once, when watching from "the room," her "place of shame" (171), she is transformed. Legs's experience recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "The Windhover."

Staring at the hawks actually weeping to see the hawks, those predators....her heart lifting in joy seeing their strength, their beauty, riding the air, cunning in their use of the wind, always watchful...instructing her in freedom in cunning in ceaseless watchfulness in the presence of her enemies (171).

Legs has an out-of-body experience. She understands that she has the power to "make them regret all they ever did to you and your sisters, but never let them know it's you" (167).

[S]he ascended the air, the cinderblock wall fell away, the land itself fell away but the sky was immense [and]...she was allowed to know that she need never return to that old life, never to that old self... *"Masters of the air, I am one of you"* (171).

She now knows that whatever face she presents publicly, she must also be a predator to survive (128). She learns to be humble, to be grateful, to be good. As a result of the loss of her old self, Legs now becomes a "trustee," a model prisoner: "knowing at the young age of sixteen how power need never relinquish any degree of power" (172). Her safely dissociated inner voice now knows that *"no one and nothing will touch me ever again. If anybody is to kill it will be me"* (174). Her actions after she is released from prison - hooking and kidnapping- attest to Legs's new thinking and to her dissociative experiences at Red Bank. They form a narrative commentary on the effects of her experiences in her family and in prison, and link these two experiences to her abandonment of moral conscience and rejection of the law.

Chapter seven is a sharp narrative comment on the horrors committed in the name of personal freedom. Following the scene of Legs's transformation, the section at first appears to be jarringly out of place. It is a horrific chapter, oddly entitled, "The Paradox of Chronology/Dwarf Woman." Oates's narrator, Madelaine, claims that it needs to be in this position in the text to honour the chronology of Maddy's notebook. The section concerns a deformed dwarf woman of low intelligence named Yetta whose treatment at the hands of her brother prompts Legs to take the law into her own hands. Legs's actions prepare the reader

for the escalating acts of violence and lawlessness which will become normal operating procedures for the gang later on.

Yetta is held by a collar to a clothesline during the day, and tied spread-eagled and naked on the bed at night for the sexual pleasure of Hammond citizens, including some members of the local police department. The image drawn of the dwarf woman is by far the most grotesque and degrading portrait in the text.

Yetta's story has a two-fold role in the architectonics of the novel. In terms of acts of revenge, this section ends with Legs, by herself, and without the knowledge of the gang members, returning to the house where Yetta is held and in an act of profound rage, pouring gasoline around it and igniting it.

She's methodical, acts without haste...dreamily yet deliberately strikes a match and lets it drop...already smiling, turning...as the first flames leap up...a necklace of flame teeth circling both the old farmhouse and the tavern (203).

The reader surmises that the flames engulf and kill Yetta and any men present. The insertion of this event, in which the reader sees a situation where human beings choose to perform evil acts on Yetta, and Legs chooses to end that evil by performing a criminal act, forms a perfect parallel with the other structural oddity in the text, the chapter on rock debris, entitled "A Short History of the Heavens," Part Three, chapter three. In this chapter, Maddy simply lists all the incidents and dates of falling rock debris, from 1594 to the present time. There is nothing she or anyone else can do to stop this solar activity, no matter how dangerous it is to the earth's inhabitants. In the chapter on Yetta, however, the events are not random,

but planned and calculated with evil intent. Oates's principal narrator, Madelaine, is saying that man, by exercising his will, can and must prevent such things from occurring.

The final constellation of revenge activities in *Foxfire* is a series of what the gang members call "hooking" incidents. By hooking, Foxfire girls mean posing as sexual bait for predatory males, then extorting money from them. This pattern of extortion begins after Legs gets out of jail and negotiates the rental of a decrepit house for the Foxfire girls. Providing money to run the house quickly becomes a primary concern. Legs, dressed as a young man, attempts to get a job working for a wealthy gentleman. When the potential employer, Mr. Rucke, a homosexual with a penchant for young men, suggests that Legs pose for photographs, Legs retaliates viciously because her complex of emotions around being treated as a sexual object has been triggered. She slashes his face with a knife, and feels intense pleasure at seeing his blood and tears. Legs then steals his valuables and blackmails the wealthy man into silence. She brings this concept of hooking for cash to the rest of the gang soon after.

Every Foxfire girl participates in the hooking scam as a way of contributing to the family finances. The girls take turns luring men. They sit alone, seemingly unprotected in public places. Foxfire girls are always close at hand but hidden from sight. Each young woman acts on the assumption that the very sight of a young, unprotected female will act as a magnet for men. They do not doubt the success of their enterprise because in their experience all men are untrustworthy. In the

“hooking” section, no male ever refuses their bait. Gang members adopt Legs's belief that they are "in a state of undeclared war" (246) on men. This adds more fuel to a commonly held view that the text's main point is describing the gang's relentless persecution of males. In fact, the novel is more concerned with issues of women finding love and protection than it is with exposing how men oppress women. By choosing an extreme situation, Oates's narrator can illustrate the profound effects of low self-esteem in females, and the legacy of unstable family lives. For example, Maddy's experience of “hooking” demonstrates how vulnerable a woman is when she comes from a fatherless family. When Chick Mallick approaches her in a bus station, Maddy notes that the man has a “fatherly, bullying smile” (241); when he takes her hand outside, “the absolutely mad absolutely unacceptable thought flies through her brain. *Daddy*” (243). Chick Mallick leads her down a narrow alley at the base of the parking lot. There he tries to rape her. He tears off her clothes, moaning, "You will, will you? you will? I'll tear your head off, I'll tear your little cunt open!" (246). Legs is the first member of the gang to intervene. She brings "something down hard on his bobbing head, so hard, with skull-fracturing precision, [that] he doesn't cry out but just sighs" (247). From this point on in the text Maddy does not trust Legs's judgement.

*Since that terrible night I was afraid of you I guess. You saved my life but I was afraid of you having seen you hit him the way you did. And the others, my sisters. So wild, frenzied. Striking with fists, boots. Slamming him with lengths of iron pipe, anything they could snatch up from the ground (253).*

The long section on hooking exposes the gang's escalating violence and

abandonment of reason. It gives Legs the idea of the million-dollar hook, which leads to the kidnapping and torture of multi-millionaire Whitney Kellogg Jr. and causes the collapse of the Foxfire gang. After the series of hooking activities, Legs decides that one big hook for a million dollars will solve all of Foxfire's survival problems. The decision shows Legs's flawed vision. She innocently believes that no one will be hurt in the kidnapping process, that she will release the prisoner unharmed, that money will make up for the deprivation she and her gang members have suffered. Her blind spots demonstrate her flawed leadership.

Legs decides to kidnap Whitney Kellogg, the father of the only wealthy person she has ever met, Marianne Kellogg. The naive young woman was paired with Legs as part of a Christian Woman's program run at Red Bank. Legs focuses on Marianne's father because his is the only wealthy home to which she has ever been invited. In Legs's mind, the plan is a matter of achieving a just victory over the insiders who control the world. Meeting Mr. Kellogg made Legs feel "as if she'd shrunken in actual size" (260); visiting his estate, "Windward," brings back fantasies she had as a child of "wreak[ing] such damage as she wished." On the grounds of "Windward," Legs's "pride [is] like a flammable material touched by a match" (288). Everywhere she looks she sees injustice to the underclass. Legs is angered that credit for the beautiful rose garden goes to Mrs. Kellogg, not to the gardener. Looking at hand-embroidered pillows in a bedroom, Legs sees only "exhaustion and depletion" (268) of the poor. Observing the gleaming floors in the house, she wonders whose labour made them shine (264). Legs hears the opinions of the

defrocked, alcoholic priest, Father Theriault repeated in her thoughts:

*How the fine handiwork of the poor, the exhaustion and depletion of their souls, slave labour; wage-slave-labour, ends up ineluctably in the possession of the rich...(268).*

Legs has internalized Theriault's words about the tenets of socialism. The way the Kelloggs live, the fact that Mr. Kellogg hates both communists and unions, strengthens her resolve to extort money from him. Legs views Mr. Kellogg as one of the chosen "who move through life with advantage amidst the teeming multitudes of no advantage" (289). He rants about the abuses he sees creeping into his prosperous system:

Everywhere the Commie-backed unions are making their moves! Like snakes in the night! Great greedy pythons! Stuffing their bellies! Sick leave they want! Sick *pay*! Pay 'em for being sick! Can you believe it? Eh? Pay 'em for being drunks!-falling into their machines! It's a plot to crush us! Suck our blood! (284).

To Legs, Mr. Kellogg and his wife and daughter personify everything blind in the upper-class world. They are people who do not see the poor they feed upon. They define as evil only those things which impact upon them. Their innocent daughter has no idea that evil truly exists. Legs's complex of emotions around the way the rich use the skills of the poor to benefit themselves is triggered by Mr. Kellogg's words. In her rage to punish the insiders of Hammond, Legs abandons her reason. Legs loses the backing of her partner, Maddy, who refuses to write ransom notes or to take part in the kidnapping. She fails to consider the response of the hostage and his family, or the possible emotional reactions of the less stable Foxfire members like VV. Legs's faulty thinking becomes the final unravelling of

the Foxfire gang.

What Legs does not count on is the spiritual transformation of Mr. Kellogg after the girls take him hostage. Choking and vomiting in the car, Mr. Kellogg "broke through to Jesus Christ who promised to save him" (288) if he would embrace Him in faith. Having found Christ, Kellogg has no need to cooperate with his captors. "Never had Legs anticipated this!" (300):

*Like it isn't enough to own factories and mansions to have in your employ thousands of human beings this fucker has God too. Like heaven itself is another property, he knows he's got a place in! (306).*

The "ordeal," that Legs feels she is now unable to extricate herself from with dignity, brings her back to the days and weeks she spent in solitary confinement at the Red Bank Correctional facility. Mr. Kellogg's religion, she speculates, is giving him his strength. Legs's rage never abates because, in her view, Mr. Kellogg has only to cooperate by speaking to his wife about the ransom and he will be set free. But when Kellogg is shot by VV after he makes a sudden jerking movement, Legs's rage dissipates. She now sees that "the Enemy is after all only a man...on his back, bleeding" (311) and she insists on calling an ambulance. Foxfire is finished. A short time later, the brightly painted car Legs is driving flies off the bridge and she, her accomplices and her car are lost forever.

After the car "flies off the bridge shorn of its right rear fender" (316), Legs achieves mythic status. All the motifs the narrator has used to describe her exploits become part of her legend. Legs's visual totem throughout the text are her long, muscular legs and her ability to run. Running is the way Legs physically dissociates

herself from situations. At the start of the text she is running from her grandmother's house. She tries to run from prison. She tries to run from the truth about her mother's wanting to abort her. Legs cannot express her need to physically dissociate in prison by running, and her mind nearly shatters because of this. Her need to run is so acute that she psychologically merges with the flying hawks - the only creatures she can see from her room in solitary confinement. At the conclusion of the text, Legs cannot stay, even in structural terms. She is a fragment flying off a bridge in a car named "Lightning Bolt" - a flash of electrical current, a dissociated fragment.

The way Oates's narrator presents Legs contributes to the sense readers get of her fragmentation. She is both male and female. In matters of dress and attitude, Legs is presented as male. Legs's voice is tough, worldly, knowing, bitter. Like a young man, she is flat-chested, narrow-hipped, long-legged, fast and agile on her feet. She does not show fear and has territorial instincts about the women she views herself as protecting. She competes with males in acts of recklessness and prowess, like scaling the Hammond water tower or leaping from roof to roof on Fairfax Avenue row houses. She views herself as the head of the family, the father, the caretaker of the injured young women she takes in. Oates's narrator also gives the reader glimpses of the female, nurturing side of Legs. Legs is a woman who cannot admit that she has a heart, but who surreptitiously gives to the needy and cares for the old in her Fairfax Avenue neighbourhood.

For Oates's narrator, though, it is not so much a matter of whether Legs is

male or female, but whether or not she is an adventurer. Oates says that she initially conceived of the character of Legs Sadovsky in *Foxfire* as a mythic figure, but discovered, after reading the wildly conflicting reviews, that the novel was thought of as "a different novel from the one [she'd] set out to write... *My 'Huck Finn' I'd thought it playfully & now people tell me, assure me, it's filled with anger/rage*" (Johnson 396, italics mine).<sup>53</sup> The connection Oates makes between Samuel Longhorne Clemens's<sup>54</sup> 1884 classic, and the playful aspect of the *Foxfire* text rings true in the character of Legs Sadovsky. Aligning Huck and Legs helps to explain some of the conundrums her character presents as the focal point of a otherwise realistic novel.

Like Huck, Legs is motherless and has an unreliable, alcoholic father. Where Huck's father appears in the text to claim his fortune, Legs's father, Ab Sadovsky, appears in court to destroy publicly what Legs holds dearest - her reputation for chastity. Legs and Huck share some similarities: they both crave freedom from restrictive situations and places; both crave adventure, even if it submits them to danger. Huck shows courage by setting out on a home-made raft;

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<sup>53</sup>It is curious that Oates found it surprising that people viewed *Foxfire* as "filled with anger/rage" (Johnson 396). The anger and rage expressed in the novel may be the result of hurt and deprivation, but the fact is that the young girls's emotional wounds do trigger angry responses which translate into group violence. How could the author describe the number of violent, retaliatory acts of *Foxfire*, however well-deserved they are, and be surprised they are viewed this way? Either Oates is toying with the readers, or she has, because of her deep sympathy for the predicament of these disadvantaged girls, dissociated herself from the violent acts they perform.

<sup>54</sup>Clemens wrote under the name Mark Twain. The entry about the author in *The Oxford Companion To American Literature*, however, is listed under Clemens. I am using the author's real name in the text for that reason.

Legs shows courage by climbing the Hammond water tower, the tallest structure in town. Like Huck, Legs is restless, always needing to "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest" (Clemens 229 ). Huck does not want to be civilized. Legs fears having to lose her vision of herself as an outlaw. She is unable to mature, as Maddy does in the text, because that would mean taking full responsibility for her actions and wrongheaded decisions. Oates's narrator respects the limits of Legs's ability to change and her portrayal of this larger-than-life character creates an enlarged image against which to measure the process of emotional growth and maturity that occurs in Maddy.

This comparison is especially noticeable if we examine the final scene in which the reader has contact with Maddy with the last scene in which the reader encounters Legs. Maddy is present in the text right to the end of the novel's epilogue. The reader sees the mature Madelaine, focussing her now fully developed powers of scientific observation onto her own past. She questions whether the person she was can be connected in any way to the responsible adult she has now become. Legs is present only as a memory. She is discussed by two former Foxfire members, Madelaine and Rita; her memory is made more vivid by the faded picture Rita has clipped from a newspaper, showing a woman at a Castro rally in Cuba who closely resembles her. All that is left of Legs is a newspaper clipping from April, 1961, saved by former Foxfire member Rita (Elizabeth) O'Hagan, showing an androgynous "tall, slender, blonde" (324) American-looking figure, a virtual double of Legs, "swept up in the mood of the crowd of raptly listening angry spectators"

(324) in Havana. Whether or not the photo is really of Legs is insignificant because the very likeness of the two images is enough to inform the reader that a character like Legs could never really grow up. Moving to a place of chaos and revolution would perfectly fit Legs's idea of herself as a leader, a helper of the less fortunate. Like Huckleberry Finn, Legs might strike out for new territory where she could be free to remain on the fringes of society, free to act without reflection - to mouth slogans with little thought given to the individuals who might be affected. The connection Oates makes with Clemens's classic adventure novel explains the romantic handling of Legs at the end of the realistic text. Legs, like Huck, cannot be contained in the end because she is mythical. Rather than being incarcerated again, Legs uses all her creative energy to achieve lift-off from Hammond when her "luridly painted car" (316), Lightning Bolt, "flies off the bridge... miraculously intact rocking crazily from side to side...[a]nd is never sighted again" (316).<sup>55</sup>

Legs is the mythical father figure for the group of orphaned teens in lower town. Her visionary qualities, her appearance, her willingness to engage the world in all its grisliness, forms a protective shield around the members of the Foxfire gang, but only for a short time. Legs's instinct to protect is nurturing initially, but her growing belief in the exaggerated image she has projected of herself undermines the security she seeks for the dependent children in her gang. Although she has a scar on her face which shows that she has tangled with the outside world, Legs is,

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<sup>55</sup>John Crowley sees Legs's path as transcendence rather than oblivion. In his 1993 review of *Foxfire*, he says that "Legs transcends defeat, and exits from the personal into the universal, at least for the women who remember her" (6).

in the end, only a child herself, unable to understand that rigid rules, initiation rites and procedures do not, in themselves, create a harmonious family life. After she secures a house for the Foxfire girls, Legs herself realizes that she is operating out of her depth. Her failure lies in not being able to trust anyone except women who appear more needy and dependent than she is. Her deep lack of trust in men prevents her from seeking out any healthy males. Because of these two things, the world Legs creates is both false and constricted. All the characters who follow her are *under* her; because she is immature, she cannot envision the idea of harmonious equality. She becomes a small "d" despot in the Foxfire gang. With Legs there is no room for nuance or discussion. From the first initiation rites she is in control as the high priestess of the group. Because she is incapable of relinquishing power, members of Foxfire with the strength to do so grow and leave. In Legs's egocentric opinion, however, they have not left of their own volition, but have been "X-iled" by her. In the five sections of grimly realistic text before the Epilogue, Maddy and Rita make a transition to mature adult life and Violet uses her beauty and cunning to hook a man who will eventually bring her uptown to live, but the others - Goldie, Lana and VV, and especially the leader, Legs - are truncated emotionally and unable to grow.

By eliminating Legs's constantly moving figure from the text, Oates makes space to examine the narrator, Madelaine. She is the character in the novel who has been able to grow and change despite the continual scheming movements of Legs. Madelaine has respected the limits of Legs's ability to change in *Foxfire*, and her

portrayal of this larger-than-life character creates an enlarged image against which to measure the process of emotional growth in Maddy. Maddy's development in the text, and her growth into a thinking adult, is the strand that exposes the Foxfire concept as an impossibility in an adult world. In the beginning of the text, Maddy idealizes Legs, is captivated by her posturing and by the image she presents. Legs's conviction that she can change things is compelling to the shy young girl. Maddy never, however, completely abandons her sense of reason, and it is this which allows her to grow, to separate from the group, and to have the capacity to re-examine her youth with clear-sightedness.

Maddy always holds onto her personal opinions while she a member of the gang. Early in the text, when Rita is feeling and acting helpless, Maddy does not want to be associated with her, (26) even though Legs reminds her that each one of them is potentially a "Rita." Maddy participates in the revenge against Buttinger but is the only member of the gang to take something positive from knowing him. She learns from Buttinger that "the only place there is an answer is in the universe of numbers" (28). She stores this information away and uses it later in her professional life when her work in a solar science requires the precision of mathematics. In the tattooing ceremony, Maddy is the only member of the gang who pauses to consider the meaning of her vow not to tell anyone about Foxfire. The injunction to silence clearly does not sit well with her and the whole premise for the text is that she has decided, at age fifty, to disobey the injunction and break the silence. Maddy is wary of Goldie, uneasy with Lana (34). In her interactions

with Uncle Wimpy, she separates reason from emotion enough to understand that even though she disliked Wimpy, she had been attracted to people like him, "drawn to those who believe themselves superior to us and who seem to be sitting in judgement on us" (61). When the gang attacks Wimpy for his abuse of Maddy, she has enough self-control to stop the group from killing him. Maddy feels the loss of her father at war deeply, yet she does not block out the fact that her father was flawed. She remembers his "breath smelling of whiskey, quarrels in the house" (65). When the gang goes to the Museum to see the Tree of Life, she is the only one of the Foxfire members who is "fascinated by how *complex* the tree of life is, how multiple its branches" (102); other members of Foxfire simply note that "*Homo Sapiens is no big deal!*" (102). When beautiful Violet Kahn is initiated into the gang, Maddy is the only one who feels that the initiation is cruel and degrading to the young woman whose beauty she is jealous of. "*Why am I doing this I'm not cruel like this I don't want to hurt another human being do I?*" (106) she thinks in disgust. Maddy can fantasize without blotting out reality. For example, when Legs is leading the police on a reckless chase in Lightning Bolt, Maddy fantasizes about the warmth and intimacy of being in her mother's womb, but she cannot sustain the fantasy. Immediately she sees "Momma's face upside down puffy groggy face upside down....where she'd hurt herself on the stairs bruised and bleeding" (121). Then, eyes wide open, she watches as the car flies out of control: "She'll remember all her life this *Now, now*" (122).

After Legs is released from prison, Maddy is disturbed when Legs

announces that she has come to some “‘absolute’ conclusions about life” (191 ). She notices that Legs has changed, that there is "something aggressive and sexual in just the way Legs stands, hip bone and pelvis tilted" (191). Oates's narrator emphasizes that at this point Maddy realizes that Legs is "dangerous" (121). Madelaine tells the readers that Maddy "was maybe the most scared" (204) of the direction in which Legs was leading them. The split Maddy feels between her loyalty to Foxfire and her equally intense need for protection is clear when the "hooking" operation starts and Maddy finds herself frightened constantly:

ITEM. And then there's "Killer" not knowing from one hour to the next *is she happy so happy the happiest she's ever been* living with her Foxfire sisters free of the intervention and tyranny of all adults or is she scared almost all of the time scared of the police scared of what's to come" (237-38).

Maddy's overt revelation of her movement away from gang thinking takes place when she refuses to co-operate in the killing of Mr. Kellogg or in the writing of ransom notes. She is incredulous that Legs intends to proceed with the kidnapping; she is horrified that Legs remains completely blind to the plan's potential for violence and the real penalty for transgressing the law. As Legs is preparing for the final "hook," Maddy is thinking as an individual with rights and responsibilities in society. Maddy's loss of trust in Legs begins when Legs is released from prison; it escalates when she recognizes how violent Legs is in the attack on Chick Mallett; it becomes public knowledge within the gang when she refuses to write the ransom notes; and it reaches its zenith when the proposal to kidnap is seriously presented to the gang.

Maddy has two voices in the text: one as a middle-aged scientist combing the past to reassemble the truth about Foxfire; the other is the voice Maddy recorded in her chronicle of the gang nearly thirty years ago. This teenaged voice is immature, impressionable, yet brilliantly observant. Maddy is the emotional heart of *Foxfire*. The entire text is channelled through her perceptions, reactions and agility with words. Oates use of Madelaine /Maddy as the narrator is brilliant because it splits one person who is not dissociated into two distinct voices - the impressionable Maddy Monkey and the divorced middle-aged woman scientist, Madelaine Faith Wirtz. Maddy, as an impressionable teen, both idolizes and idealizes Legs. She focuses all her energy on using her powers of observation and sharp writing skills to record the exploits of Foxfire. Being part of the gang she is chronicling allows her no emotional distance from her material. Fifty-year-old Madelaine, on the other hand, has spent her professional life looking back in time by examining solar photographs at a laboratory in Quincy, New Mexico. Madelaine has "an eye for discovering [if without the power to avert] impending catastrophes" (326). Now middle-aged, she has the intellectual and emotional tools to examine her past in the Foxfire gang. She knows enough not to trust the chronicle she has written as an impressionable adolescent, so she researches the public incidents regarding Foxfire by piecing together "out of old newspapers and records a rudimentary official account" (320) of the last weeks of the gang's existence. While this adult Madelaine is quite different from the teenager who was a member of Foxfire, her powers of observation have been a constant.

In Oates's text it is the mixture of precise observation from Madelaine and intense emotion from Maddy that gives the novel its force. Maddy is in every sense the "heart" of the text, and although the focus appears to be on Legs for much of the time, the growth and change is in Maddy. Maddy's descriptions have an enthusiasm, a sureness that the comments of the adult narrator Madelaine do not. As John Crowley commented in his excellent review of *Foxfire* for the *New York Times Book Review*, using the two chronologically distanced voices "gives [Oates's] story a remarkably flexible and various narrative voice that ranges from naive revelation to echoes of the antique heroic" (6). Madelaine, the adult narrator, constantly intrudes in the *Foxfire* text to deny accuracy, to note omissions (97). She claims that she has never lied in the text but asks what to name a section she writes when verifiable truth is unavailable to the author (196). Madelaine writes about incidents she was not present for in her youth, such as the fight with the Viscounts in the schoolyard. She writes about experiences and thoughts she thinks Legs may have had in prison. She presents the scene where Legs sets fire to the house as factual, yet fails to note any record of the incident in the local press or in any other public document.

Madelaine presents herself as emotionally detached in her research on *Foxfire*, yet she gives a number of indications that her judgement is flawed. She says she is not a "practiced writer" (197). She says she's "not leading this material but led by it, sometimes my heart fainting thinking God knows where I will be led, what shame, what sorrow" (197). The melodramatic tone Madelaine presents here

does not fit in with that of the precise and observing scientist we are introduced to earlier in the text. Madelaine's voice *does remain* the dominant one, but even at the end of the text, there is still some fragmentation between Maddy's adolescent chronicle and Madelaine's adult version. Maddy's voice changes when it is combined with her adult Madelaine voice. Some passion disappears, but it is replaced by a complex sensibility and attention to nuance that the original chronicler, Maddy, did not possess. The chronicle Maddy keeps as a teenager, and the confessions Maddy, now at fifty years old, puts together, contain the voices of two personalities, now integrated by this experience of writing the confession. Now Madelaine is able to defy the Foxfire injunction not to speak of gang activities that Legs dictated so many years ago. She has her own voice now - and it is a careful, articulate, intelligent and sympathetic voice. The voice of Madelaine no longer idealizes; it validates the fact that there is evil in the world; she challenges her readers to do something about that evil.

The Foxfire girls like to think of themselves as "a true outlaw gang" (4); their models are all violent and male; their leader, Legs, knows "by heart the sagas of Jesse James and of Billy the Kid [and the] Mafioso warlords of upper New York State. She claims to own a handkerchief soaked in the blood of John Dillinger,<sup>56</sup> and

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<sup>56</sup>Two other outlaws besides Dillinger are mentioned in the text as Legs's heroes: Billy the Kid and Jesse James. Billy the Kid was the nickname of a late nineteenth-century criminal, William H. Bonney (1859-1881). In New Mexico, he led the "Lincoln County cattle war" (Hart 75). He then became a cattle stealer, committing twenty-one murders in the process. "He has been apotheosized in dime novels and serious fiction" (Hart 75).

Jesse James, another nineteenth-century outlaw (1843-1915) was part of the Quantrill Gang during the Civil War. Later, in partnership with his brother, he "led what became the most notorious band of robbers in U.S. history" (Tate 375).

uses it in the Foxfire initiation ceremony. The symbol adopted by the sisterhood is the Foxfire flame. It represents the collective anger of a group of young women who, because of their gender, broken families and low socio-economic status, have been relegated to a base position in Hammond; it exists as a motif of their need to act out against those people who have hurt them; it is an emblem of hope burning for those females who cannot protect themselves.

At the conclusion of the text, the anger and imaginative vision that Legs possesses is shown to be seriously flawed. Without the constraints of reason Foxfire collapses. The narrator, Madelaine, illustrates that collective will in any gender is a highly volatile and pernicious thing. The fact that the gang defines itself by excluding adults leaves it vulnerable to emotions trampling reason. That fact that Oates tells her readers that the members of this gang are disadvantaged, fatherless and already deeply hurt psychologically firmly places the significance of the text where it belongs. This is not a narrative written to encourage female violence. It is, however, an example of Oates writing with a didactic purpose in mind. Her fictional account of the gang emphasizes the need for a strong parental presence in the lives of their adolescent children. The novel rewrites the history of gangs for the sake of those disadvantaged and abused women.

The two-tiered narration of *Foxfire* demands that readers go behind the actual events reported in the text to look at the novel's underlying assumptions. Oates makes three strong points: first, that females without fathers are at terrible

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risk in making their way in the world; second, that females who are also isolated physically, economically, socially or psychologically are easy prey for social and sexual abuse; third, that the history of women in disadvantaged groups, and, in particular, the huge gap that separates them from protected upper-class women must be acknowledged and corrected. Oates's *Foxfire* re-creates a history that accords disadvantaged women of the fifties respect and understanding they did not receive at the time; it dramatically demonstrates why these women were angry; it records the dangers facing society when anger takes precedence over reason; it points out the impossibility of completely excluding the male gender and the wrong-headedness of viewing all males in predatory terms.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Oates stated her view of *Foxfire* in the August 15, 1993 edition of *The New York Times Book Review*. She wrote that *Foxfire* “demonstrates that a world that excludes men just can't endure, and finally it all comes crashing down. The fantasy dreams of adolescence clash against the realities of maturity” (NYTBR 6).

## Chapter Five

### *Zombie: The Nadir of the Dissociation Continuum*

*Run, run as fast as you can,  
You can't catch me,  
I'm the gingerbread man.* (Nursery rhyme)

In 1994, Oates wrote an article that reviewed ten books on serial killers for the *New York Review of Books*. In the March 24 article, entitled “I Had No Other Thrill or Happiness,” Oates states that:

The burgeoning chronicles of serial killing are unnervingly illuminating and suggest that beneath a mask of civility... the nature of man is that of a beast of prey; indeed, of madness itself (56).

Jeffrey Dahmer, a middle-class homosexual male, and one of the subjects in a book Oates reviewed for her article, appeared to personify the madness of which she spoke. Dahmer stalked, murdered, and even cannibalized some of his male victims. He appears to be the model for the central character in both the short story “Zombie,” published in the *New Yorker* in 1994, and Oates's 1995 novel that bears the same name. According to Oates's biographer, Greg Johnson, publication of “Zombie,” Oates's first short story to be accepted for publication in the *New Yorker* in more than three decades, was held up for months because of “concerns that the details drawn from Dahmer's case would provoke a lawsuit” (399). In both the short story and the novel, Oates establishes that predatory psychopaths are a fact of

life in America. Quentin, the character's given name, or Q\_P\_, the name the thirty-one-year-old man gives himself in his chronicle, brings the reader inside the mind of a person who lacks conscience, feeling and the ability to form relationships. The impact of the book lies not so much in its terrifying subject matter as in the fact that it compels readers to face the beast in their midst. The serial killer underlines the existence of evil in the world; the fact that Q\_P\_ is never apprehended is a chilling reminder of the continued existence of that evil. Q\_P\_ stands outside the borders of the dissociated or fragmented personality examined in other of Oates's texts in this thesis. Because of this, it is a fitting text with which to end this discussion of trauma, fragmentation and dissociation.

*Zombie* is a chilling chronicle.<sup>58</sup> All information and every drawing in the text come from the narrator, the psychopathic murderer, Q\_P\_. The reader is destabilized from the first coldly delivered lines of the text, in which the narrator's detachment, memory lapses and lack of feeling become clear. The reader remains equally destabilized at the conclusion of the text when the narrator makes it clear that he will go on killing exactly as before and that he will not be caught. *Zombie* is both the zenith and the nadir of this study of the dissociative process in voices in Oates's texts from 1987 to 1995: the zenith because the central character, Q\_P\_ is more than a little fragmented, dissociated or depressed- he is psychotic; the nadir because it brings the reader up against the most aberrant type of human being - a man driven by deadly compulsions, a man without feeling except at the most

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<sup>58</sup>All references to *Zombie* will appear in parenthesis after citations.

primitive level, a man without conscience. In creating such a character, Oates explores how Q\_P\_ can be called human.

The split in Q\_P\_ is a permanent and irreparable division, but even *he* experiences emotional storms when clusters of feelings and thought associations are triggered while he is trying to transform his human specimens into zombies. Q\_P\_ has splits within splits. His mind does not work in the same way as other characters' minds, such as Enid Stevick's, Iris Courtney's, Kelly Kelleher's, Calla Freilicht's, or Legs Sadovsky's, discussed in other chapters of this thesis. He is, however, somewhat like the murdering nurse's aide, Kathleen Hennessy, who lives a superficially normal life, and periodically kills patients when she dissociates in rage. The disconnection in Q\_P\_ is insurmountable. Nothing in his neurological constitution channels what he *does* to what he *feels*; he has no conscience. As Joel Norris notes in his general discussion of this type of killer in his cogent text *Serial Killers: The Growing Menace*, there is an "absence of a sense of self...and an almost hair-trigger violent response to external stimuli with no regard for physical or social consequences" (38). Q\_P\_ is a serial killer "*whose self-definition, whose sole pleasure*" is bound up with killing (Oates *NYRB* 52). He is driven by the need for love which he equates with mastery, and by anger which has developed from years of being socially invisible to those he wishes to attract. In his mind, the gruesome murders he commits are simply the by-products of his failed, quasi-scientific attempts to create an unthinking, robotic human who would be his very own zombie - a friend, a lover and an obedient servant. The failures also reinforce

his feelings of inferiority with regard to his father, a successful academic and scientist. He has internalized his father's criticizing voice and replays those criticisms constantly in his head.

When his zombie experiments consistently fail, Q\_P\_ becomes disappointed. He resumes his medication - lithium - and refrains from alcohol and drugs until his brain stops buzzing, the voices in his head cease, and he can look people directly in the eye. When a cluster of events again converge, however, and he spots a young man who resembles his childhood "friend," Barry, who, Oates intimates, was drowned by Q\_P\_, the urge to replace his lost love object is again triggered. Q\_P\_ then follows a set pattern of events. He goes off his medication, starts drinking, takes "ludes," alcohol and caffeine in great amounts, and stirs his brain until the need for sex slams through him again and again like a tidal wave. These intense sexual feelings propel Q\_P\_ to stalk his next victim. It is an obsessive, cyclical pattern that Oates describes, one which will not cease. Q\_P\_ is an invisible killer. He is undistinguished physically - white, polite, generous. He will continue to kill for as long as he can overpower his victims physically. He will need to kill because his subjects will always die, making the challenge of finding a new replacement specimen always necessary. It is unlikely that he will ever be caught. He is already in the hands of the mental health system. His family routinely collude to protect their own reputations first and his reputation second.

Family and health officials refer to Q\_P\_, the thirty-one-year-old sociopath, as Quentin. He always refers to himself as Q\_P\_. Whenever Q\_P\_ fails to convince

his victims to submit to the experimental frontal lobotomies, or whenever he makes prolonged eye contact with his love object, his psychotic and murderous episodes occur.

It was observed for that period of incarceration Q\_P\_ was not talking & was not making EYE CONTACT with anybody...In that way...the fuckers slide down into your soul (8).

Q\_P\_ has already had a number of failed zombie experiments. Like his critical academic father, he grades his efforts. So far all the marks are F's, for no zombie has survived to give him the unconditional love he seeks. The death of each zombie puts another cycle of obsession into motion. Q\_P\_ desperately wants to create a zombie which will get him an "A." In that way, Q\_P\_ will have failed neither his parents nor himself.

Dad & Mom had hoped for me to become a scientist like Dad, or a doctor. But things had not turned out that way. But I knew I could perform a transorbital lobotomy even if it was in secret. All I would need was an ice pick & a specimen (42).

The lobotomy procedure is extremely important to Q\_P\_. In his mind, being a self-taught scientist elevates him to much higher status than his present job as "caretaker" of his grandmother's rooming house. His family gave him the caretaking job after he was given a suspended sentence for assaulting a university student. The family feels that if he demonstrates his ability to assume responsibility to his probation officer and therapists he will have proved that the single criminal charge was an aberration in an otherwise normal life. The rooms in his grandmother's house are all occupied by foreign university students, and Q\_P\_ adheres rigidly to

his rule not to make eye contact with his tenants for most of the text. He constantly reiterates that he would never consider them as possibilities for his experiments, a sure sign that he would do just this if he were not already on probation for assault.

Q\_P\_'s fantasy is based on the three things he lacks: sexual attractiveness, power, and mastery over others. He is convinced that his specimens will be compliant and beautiful homosexual partners.

[The specimen's] eyes would be open & clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing* & nothing behind them *thinking*. Nothing *passing judgement*...He would be respectful at all times. He would never laugh or smirk or wrinkle his nose in disgust. He would lick with his tongue as bidden. He would suck with his mouth as bidden. He would cuddle as a teddy bear as bidden. He would rest his head on my shoulder like a baby. Or I would rest his head on my shoulder like a baby...AND WE WOULD COUNT THE CHIMES UNTIL WE FELL ASLEEP AT THE SAME MOMENT (49-50).

Since the narrative posture adopted by Oates for *Zombie* is a personal chronicle recorded by Q\_P\_, it is not long before the reader can see that Q\_P\_ is not whole and has no firmly internalized sense of himself. Frequently, Q\_P\_ narrates the text as if he were standing outside himself. He always describes what he is wearing and assumes others will see him as he sees himself. His voice in the text is flat and without affect when he is dealing with any figure in authority. He remembers exactly the questions asked him and repeats them robotically, never giving an answer more detailed than "& I said." He is cunning enough to take pains to be what he thinks each of his doctors, his probation officer, and the members of his family want him to be. He looks his father in the eye and answers all his questions with truthful-sounding statements. He is polite and attentive to his

grandmother and her friends. He makes up dreams to tell his therapist; he pretends to be sorry for the assault he committed just for the benefit of his group therapy leader. And while he makes all these outward gestures and utters these words, Q\_P\_ remains completely emotionally unengaged. When his father speaks to him of a fresh start, Q\_P\_ sees a "tweed asshole" mouthing words to him; while he is chatting with his grandmother and her friend, he idly wonders whether it would be better just to kill them now and be done with it. When he chats with his father at the entrance to his caretaking room, he remains nonchalant while knowing that the body of Bunnygloves is in the upright locker, that the ice pick is under his mattress, and that the victim's blood-sodden underwear and pubic hairs are still in the bathroom. His nonchalance, his cunning in parrying questions about the terrible odour point to Q\_P\_'s deranged intelligence and at the same time to the failure of other authority figures - his parents, therapists and probation officers - to do more than simply make him appear to conform to society's expectations.

*Zombie* is divided into two parts, each of which gives the trapped reader a different experience. Both sections are prefaced by hand-written title pages, suggesting the narrator's awareness of the chronicle's organization. The first section is entitled "Suspended Sentence." Its ninety pages present Q\_P\_'s background offenses, his relationships with his family, therapists and probation officer in tiny, severed pieces that reflect the narrator's mind. The reader gets an idea of how scrambled the psychopath's mind is, what propels Q\_P\_ into action, and how he strains to appear like a normal adult. Part Two, entitled "How Things

Play Out,” has eighty-eight pages and gives a detailed account of how Q\_P\_ stalks his current target, Squirrel. The intended victim is a very important experiment for Q\_P\_ because he views this teenager as a replacement for Barry, whom he drowned in a public pool when he was at Dale Springs Junior High. Squirrel, Q\_P\_ says, is “golden shining in the sun.” He views his new interest as “BARRY...RETURNED TO ME!” (100). How Q\_P\_ deals with Squirrel’s inevitable death is a stunning portrayal of the workings of a psychopath’s mind.

Part One, "Suspended Sentence," could be re-named "Suspended Pieces" because it is like an unassembled jigsaw puzzle. The facts about Q\_P\_ are scattered like his victims, with the odd piece of flesh or clothing, or maybe a gold tooth kept around as a friendly reminder of a merging in a love union which almost occurred - at least in Q\_P\_'s deranged mind. Like the victims, the reader is soon lost in a barrage of fragments, which seem too horrifying to look at, yet compelling because they are not neatly in place. In addition, the reader does not yet know what the overriding vision of the text is - and hopes that by reading all of it, the pieces will fit together and be resolved.

The voice of Q\_P\_ opens “Suspended Sentence.” He describes himself in the same factual terms a police officer would employ in reading an arrest report. He says he is a thirty-one-year-old Caucasian serving a two-year probationary sentence for assaulting a young black man. The reader is made immediately aware of some kind of division within this man by the fact that sometimes Q\_P\_ speaks of himself in the third person, and other times refers to himself as the violent and

strong Todd Cuttler. Todd is a fragment, or piece of Q\_P\_'s personality that is not normally in use when Q\_P\_ is fitting into his ordinary citizen mode. Q\_P\_ becomes Todd when he is either away from his normal job and environment or at an intense point in pursuing a victim. Todd always emerges when Q\_P\_ is off his medication, taking drugs and drinking excessively. The reader is therefore aware very early in the text that Q\_P\_'s chronicle comes from a clearly unreliable, deranged mind. In "Suspended Sentence," Q\_P\_ continues killing young men even though he is on probation. He views the extra complications of having therapists and a probation officer as a challenge he can successfully meet. Q\_P\_ presents to all those in authority precisely the demeanor each one wishes to see. When he sees his psychiatrist, group therapist or probation officer, he is neatly turned out; he speaks in a polite manner and is non-confrontational. His intention is to have all those in authority believe that he is reforming and making progress. The reader confronts a profoundly disconnected man. In this section, there is no respite offered by Oates to shield the reader from experiencing full force what it is like inside a serial killer's mind. She inserts no other narrative voice to divert the reader from what Q\_P\_ is saying, to offer hope or to protect the reader emotionally. The reader feels Q\_P\_'s mental chaos and disorganization when he goes off his medication, when his sexual drives and paranoia escalate, when his stalking of victims begins.

The reader cannot interact with the narrator because there is no way to bridge the difference between the way this man sees the world and the way a healthy person would view it. Q\_P\_ trusts no one and so brings no one into his

confidence. Q\_P\_ spews facts, but feelings are absent. He notes his height, weight and build as if he were speaking of someone else. Like many serial killers, he has no distinguishing features. From the outset, however Q\_P\_'s mind appears chaotic and fragmented. "I don't contradict but I don't remember," he says (3). The first indication of Q\_P\_'s capacity for violent rage emerges after only six short paragraphs. His anger and disconnection is expressed here and throughout the text with capitalized words and phrases, and the symbol "&." These oddities of form in the text function as indicators of the presence of the commander-like fragment in Quentin's personality that make him appear responsible. This fragment maintains control and order in Quentin's chaotic, buzzing mind. Suppressed anger is always palpable in his voice.

I never contradict. I am in agreement with you as you utter your words of wisdom. Moving your asshole-mouth & YES SIR I am saying NO Ma'AM I am saying. Behind my plastic-rimmed glasses that are the color of skin seen through plastic (3).

In addition to the commander part of his personality, Q\_P\_ also has the volatile and vicious Todd Cuttler fragment, introduced above. When Todd is dominant, Q\_P\_ might be at a particular bar, or ready to kill a victim for not cooperating. Todd, Q\_P\_ relates, has "curly red-brown hair & a moustache & he wears a leather necktie & looks kind of square, an asshole you could put something over onto if you tried" (24). Q\_P\_ introduces Todd with one of his early victims, Rooster, "the two of us high & laughing" (24). Late in the section, Q\_P\_ draws a picture of Rooster's "Handtooled kidskin boots, just a little too big for me" (78),

which he has kept as a souvenir of that murder. It gives Q\_P\_ pleasure to recall that Rooster was last seen "striding along the street in Greektown, Detroit, Thanksgiving weekend, 1991," (78) and even deeper satisfaction that the murder was never solved.

In Part Two, Q\_P\_ also becomes TODD CUTTLER when he is at "ground zero" in his plan to capture and kill Squirrel. As he waits for his white, middle-class, teenage target, Q\_P\_ refers to TODD as "Fragment Q," a cosmic force ready to explode. Todd, the narrator implies, only appears when extreme force is called for. Todd takes over when Squirrel resists Q\_P\_'s attack and kills the teen. The narrator informs the readers that there are other personas besides TODD CUTTLER, but the reader never sees them.

Q\_P\_'s plan to get sexual love by creating zombies is doomed to failure throughout the novel because he lacks medical training and also because he has an impulse disorder which triggers precipitate action. Q\_P\_ can never wait long enough to engage in sex. He has sex on and in his specimens before and during their deaths; at times the smell of the victim's urine stimulates him to orgasm, at times the sight of their tied bodies, heads covered, incapable of resisting whatever he wishes to do to them, excites him. In contrast to this sexual impulsiveness are Q\_P\_'s organizational skills, which surface each time he searches out a victim for a lobotomy.<sup>59</sup> When he targets a new victim, he becomes highly organized and happy. The narrator shows him gathering together a stolen dental instrument, a fish-

gutting knife, and an operating table which he puts in the earthen-floored cellar where he will operate on his victim. Having a dirt floor means that failed experiments are easily disposed of in the dirt or in the walls of the old foundation.

Q\_P\_'s idea of performing lobotomies<sup>59</sup> on his victims satisfies two of his deepest needs - to please his parents and to have a rationalizing vision that makes these random acts of violence seem necessary . By operating, he thinks he will become the scientist his father wanted him to be. His rationalizing vision comes from a lecture he hears his father give about "*[t]he earth [being] continually bombarded by high speed cosmic rays...from outer space...[m]ore concentrated at higher levels than lower*" (26). Certain words his father stresses in this lecture give him the vision he is searching for. Professor "P," as Q\_P\_ refers to his father, stressed that:

*As much as ninety percent of the universe's mass is in unquantifiable "black holes." Most of the Universe is therefore undetectable by our instruments & does not "obey" the laws of physics as we know them (27).*

The words "black holes" and "undetectable," and the phrase "not obey the laws" from the lecture become permanently stuck in Q\_P\_'s brain. Here, from his own learned father, Q\_P\_ believes he has received permission *not to obey* the laws of nature, and *to remain* undetected. He now knows that there are enough *black holes* in the universe to hold all his victims. He experiences a transformative moment, now feeling the "[e]arth shifting & settling beneath [his] feet" (27). In addition,

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<sup>59</sup>Ironically, the desired effect from a lobotomy may well be what Q\_P\_ unconsciously wants for his own mind, which is always buzzing with various stations and static. He may well be the one who wants to be dead.

Q\_P\_ gleans from his father's lecture that no individual's life or death could possibly matter in a universe that is 200 million years old.

[H]ow fucking futile it is to believe that any galaxy matters let alone any star of any galaxy...or any nation or any state or any country...or any individual (29).

Immediately following this transformative experience, Q\_P\_ goes to the university library to "look up LOBOTOMY" (28). He removes the information on the "Transorbital lobotomy procedure" with a razor. As he reads that the results of such a procedure are "flattening of affect to reduce emotion [and] agitation, compulsive mental cognition and physical behaviour in schizophrenics," (40) his excitement mounts. If he can learn this technique, then he believes he will be master. "I was excited, getting a HARD-ON razoring out these pages. I knew this was a TURNING POINT in my life." (42).

Q\_P\_ now has his mission, and he has the energy to accomplish it. "I am a hard worker if what I am doing has a purpose" (17). There will be no guilt in what Q\_P\_ does because he has come to a conclusion from hearing his father lecture on the universe's black holes. Q\_P\_ thinks that "God is himself the DARK MATTER" (31) who will swallow his victims up "& leave not a trace" (31). By learning to lobotomize specimens, Q\_P\_ believes that he will now be able to get love through absolute mastery. He decides to choose men with "fight & vigor in [them] & well hung" (28). To protect himself from being apprehended, Q\_P\_ decides that:

A safer specimen for a ZOMBIE would be somebody from out of town. A Hitch-hiker or a drifter or a junkie (if in good condition not skinny & strung out or sick with AIDS). Or from the black projects downtown. Somebody nobody gives a shit for. Somebody should never have been born (28).

His interior life is now teeming with focussed ideas and plans. It is no wonder, then, that when his therapist at the Mt. Vernon Medical Center, Dr. E-, asks what his fantasies are (14), Q\_P\_ is unable to supply an answer. To Q\_P\_ the fantasies are his *real* plans. They are the activities he has been engaged in for years, but now he has a whole vision built around what he does. Thinking of fantasies pales in comparison with making them happen.

[He tries to] confide in Dr. E\_. Something that might be a dream. Such as a person might have. Flying? In the sky? Swimming? In - Lake Michigan? In Manistee National Park in one of the unnamed deep and fast-flowing rivers? (14).

There are only two occasions in the text when Q\_P\_ relates "so-called" dream material to his therapist. The first is in Part Two, when he is searching for a way to trap his targeted specimen Squirrel, and the first inkling of the idea of uncrating baby chicks on the road comes to him in therapy. He replies "baby chicks" as an answer to his therapist's question of whether or not he has had any dreams. The psychiatrist is pleased, thinking that Quentin is finally sharing something with him. The truth is that Q\_P\_ remains completely immersed in formulating his plan, and not in the least engaged with his psychiatrist. The only other time in the text when Q\_P\_ gives dream material to Dr. E\_ is after he has murdered Squirrel and disposed of his body in the river. At that time, he tells Dr. E\_ that he has had a dream of being in water, not swimming, just being there. To his psychiatrist, the dream indicates engagement and progress. To Q\_P\_, it is a simple expression of the loss he has suffered when he had to get rid of Squirrel's body.

When Q\_P\_ is with his group therapist, Dr.B\_, the narrator distinctly demonstrates how his two "selves" operate. He smoothly manipulates the doctor and the others in the group by confessing his grief over the boy he "was accused of 'molesting'" (46). All the while he is laughing at their gullibility, thinking how he "did not supply details that he was black & retarded & a natural zombie!" (46). An actor fully engaged in his part, Q\_P\_'s speeds up his voice "like a runaway trailer truck down a mountain road" (46). Swearing that he had not hurt the boy, Quentin bursts into tears, and imitates another patient's "hand tremors & twitchy mouth," which causes a "flushed" (47) reaction in the doctor - a response Q\_P\_ crudely and without emotion views as akin to the doctor's coming in his pants (47). After this performance, Dr. B\_, completely duped, tells Quentin that he is "making true progress at last" (48). Quentin remains cold and distant, seeing the doctor cynically as "smiling ...the way they do they're making a gift to you of your own shit" (48).

A case could be made that Quentin's cynicism and episodes of violent anger towards others is the result of his doctors' inability to detect his constant lying and scheming. In his chronicle, Q\_P\_ exposes the collusion of the medical establishment, the justice system and, most forcefully, his father in failing to intervene in his obsessive and murderous activities. The narrator makes this point about his father exceptionally clear when he describes the latter's surprise visit to his flat just after Q\_P\_ has murdered Bunnygloves. Q\_P\_ has not yet finished cleaning up the evidence when his father appears. And although the distinguished professor asks his son a number of pointed questions about the terrible smell and

the locked upright locker where the victim is stored beside the bed, in the end he abandons the interrogation, colluding to cover up what really is wrong with his son. The narrating Q\_P\_ notes this. "For finally Dad gives up for *he does not want to know*" (36). Q\_P\_ lists all the incidents when his father fails to see what is in front of him, even though he holds "[d]ual appointments in Physics and Philosophy [and is a] senior member of a State Research Institute" (33). Quentin's memory is sharp. His father had witnessed and ignored a number of important childhood events, including Quentin's emotional state after his friend Barry's drowning death (34) when he was twelve. Once Dr. P\_ had colluded with him after finding his son's body builder magazines "enhanced" by Q\_P\_'s drawings of engorged penises. The intention to collude is clear in his father's words: "*We won't tell your mother*" (39). On that occasion, Q\_P\_ records, father and son go to the backyard and "[t]ogether ... burned the evidence. Back behind the garage where mom would not see" (39). Q\_P\_ even makes a drawing of the moment to memorialize its significance. A perverted bonding takes place in this collusion. The secret understandings continue with Q\_P\_'s mother and grandmother. He drives them to church, and even attends "four Sundays in a row" (20). His impetus to do kind acts for his grandmother and mother is tied up with the collusion-based relationship he has with each of them. His mother gives him cash, never cheques, "so dad wouldn't know" (30); his grandmother pays him for every little thing he does for her - mowing the lawn, driving her places. She continually makes it clear that her giving him money will be their secret. Q\_P\_'s grandmother unquestioningly gives him

money to buy the new truck he will use to apprehend Squirrel. The narrator makes it clear that the money will be called a loan, but there will be no obligation to pay it back.

Quentin easily colludes with women but has mixed feelings about them. He finds female police officers easier to speak to and less suspicious of him, yet he has more trouble being civil to the women in his family. He erases his mother's phone messages, refuses her invitations to have dinner. At his sister Junie's dinner party, he imagines cutting off the breasts of all the women because then they would then look more like males. His views his mother as naive for believing that he was still mourning his friend Barry's death, rather than being suspicious that he murdered him. Q\_P\_ shows in his diary that his mother also colludes with him. She never comments about his having a drinking problem; she never questions why her son frequently goes off his medication, why he is frequently dishevelled, why he does not observe normal hygiene routines. Never does she comment on his lack of friends, his secrecy, or his difficulty in maintaining eye contact with people. She does know, however, that he is on probation for a violent assault of a university student, yet voices no anxiety about her son. In fact, other than saying what a wonderful and thoughtful son he is, she is mute in the text - and clearly blind. Her daughter, Junie, makes more of an attempt to confront Quentin, but frequently stops at asking him whether he has gone off his medication and whether he is drinking again. Junie avoids talking about sexual issues with him and tries to pretend that he is normal. She jokes at a dinner party that Quentin's hair bracelet is

a leftover artifact from his hippie days to cover up the oddity of his wearing such a thing. In fact, the bracelet is made from Squirrel's and Q\_P\_'s hair intertwined around a red leather strap. No member of the family ever comments about the strange and varied clothing pieces their son and brother wears - some of which are too big for him, all of which are quite at odds with his usual wardrobe. They are an unusual assortment of things - hand-tooled boots from Rooster, a "funky leather slouch-brimmed hat" (78) from Raisineyes, frames for his glasses and a "zebra-striped shirt" (129) from Big Guy, fur-lined gloves from Bunnygloves.

Oates's authorial voice is evident in *Zombie* when one examines the amount of text space Q\_P\_ gives to subjects in his chronicle. For example, doctors, probation officers and women are given relatively little space, whereas his targeted victims, preparations for their capture, the gathering of operating implements, and Q\_P\_'s father are all given significant play in the text. The reader can surmise that his father has had the most profound influence on Q-P-, and that he holds his father most in contempt. "It is fucking hard for me to hug them. Especially Dad!" (21) he says. It is also clear that he derives no comfort from either his mother or his grandmother and that he views both of them as insignificant and powerless. His sister, Junie, breaks into his consciousness more often than his mother or grandmother because she frequently voices her concern for him. She backs down, however, as soon as he dismisses her comments. The only emotion Q\_P\_ exhibits towards family members is anger or annoyance. With the medical and legal establishments, however, he shows contempt and cynicism, laughing at their

unwitting collusion with him.

The authorial voice in Oates further guides readers by presenting the entire text of *Zombie* through Q\_P\_. When Q\_P\_ states offhandedly that he has stopped his medication, that he is now regularly “popping” pills, taking huge amounts of caffeine, not sleeping, hearing voices, the reader is clearly being warned that Q\_P\_ is a totally unreliable narrator. His chronicle reveals that he has strong paranoid tendencies. He thinks his psychiatrist reveals his sessions to his father, because his father pays the bills. At his group therapy sessions, Dr B\_ “urge[s] [the group members] to speak from the heart” (43), but Q\_P\_ is busy “wondering if it’s a one-way glass & we are being observed like laboratory rats maybe videotaped?” (43). When he does engage with other patients during group discussions, Q\_P\_ calculates that the doctor has “already been giving [him] bad marks or ??? on the reports” (45). He elides medical doctors like his psychiatrist with his Ph.D.-holding father, and believes that Dr. E\_ reports to his father about Quentin’s progress, since they are both doctors. In Quentin’s mind, his doctor’s criticisms merge with those of his father. He thinks Dr. E\_ will report: “Your son Quentin is not making much progress I’m afraid. Did you know he never dreams & *his posture is so poor*” (15).

Quentin gives the reader three different I.Q. scores - the highest being 121, which he received when he was tested in high school. No test, however, can measure his cunning. Q\_P\_ can rapidly manipulate those around him, and swiftly conform to others’ expectations of him. Whether serial killers consciously block out human relationships, or whether it is impossible for them to engage with others

because of brain dysfunction is a moot point in literature on the subject of serial killers. For example, Joel Norris argues that brain dysfunction lies at the root of a serial killer's behaviour in his 1988 book, *Serial Killers: The Growing Menace*. Norris names common characteristics found in serial killers - most of which fit Q\_P\_: "masks of sanity, compulsivity, chronic inability to tell the truth, hypersexuality, chronic drug or alcohol abuse, victim of emotional abuse, feelings of powerlessness or inadequacy" (215). Norris maintains that killing is the reason for living for the serial killer.

It is as though he lives to kill, surviving from one murder to the next, stringing out his existence by connecting the deaths of his victims. Without this string of murders he feels as if he will fall apart, that he will disintegrate psychologically. The remainder of his life is devoted to maintaining the mask of normality and sanity. Between crimes, he quietly slips back into the fabric of society (19).

Oates reviewed Norris's text for her 1994 article on books about serial killers for the *New York Review of Books*. There she states that, according to the author, "the serial killer has no free will, no intelligence, no self apart from the psychological predicament of his fate. The serial killer is an active pathogen in the organism of society" (53). This lack of free will would particularly bother Oates, whose central characters in the books examined for this thesis are able to overcome their psychological wounds or traumas by having the strength to make choices to change their lives. The lack of free will may account for the eerie emptiness in the character of Q\_P\_ in *Zombie*. Compared to the densely woven psyches of her other central characters, Q\_P\_'s personality seems as empty as his primitive line drawings

which dot the pages of the novel. Given the type of character Oates is creating, however, the emptiness is perfectly accurate, although jarringly unsettling.

Another author, Mark Seltzer, argues cogently in his 1998 text, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, that a strictly psychological explanation is clearly inadequate in the case of a serial killer. The same could be said for Q\_P\_. Beyond the collusion of his family and professionals, there is no evidence in the text of a major trauma that would render Q\_P\_ so emotionally crippled that his murders would be explainable from a psychoanalytical point of view. Seltzer merges ideas of self and society to explain the serial killer. He points to three emphases that locate the serial killer's mindset. The first revolves around the serial killers's

"fantasy of 'murdering' society itself in the interest of a survivalist dream of self-organization. Second, there is his way of understanding self construction: the turn of the fantasy into self-originating fantasies. [Third is] the bordering of the social on the psychiatric that traverses these cases: the psychologistic notions of "the self" and the sociologistic notions of "society" (130).

Seltzer sees the serial killer as involved in a war of the "self versus society" which "devolve[s] on the psychologistic theme of boundary issues and, in turn, on an unremitting war of self versus society" (130). He views the serial killer as a person whose actions cannot be explained completely in terms of the psychoanalytical; a person who appears to suffer from an absence of connections found in the normal population. When Seltzer's ideas are applied to *Zombie*, it is evident that the pathways that allow the mind to distinguish between thought and

fantasy, that prevent violent fantasies from being acted out, are either mis-wired or entirely missing in Q\_P\_. Boundaries between himself and others are meaningless when he is in the throes of his compulsion to locate and possess his victim and to repeat his acts of violence.

In her 1994 review of Norris's book, Oates noted that the author's view of the typical serial killer is based on a "harshly determinist cosmology, as brainlessly mechanical as any state of nature envisioned by Thomas Hobbes" (*NYRB* 53). She credits Norris, however, with identifying seven key phases traceable in any serial killer. Although Oates appears to find this minutely choreographed process deadened with detail, most of the phases Norris speaks of are clearly identifiable in *Zombie's* Q\_P\_.

The seven phases Norris names are as follows: the aura phase, the trolling phase, the wooing, capture and murder phases, the totem phase, the depressive episode following the murder, and the repetition of the whole cycle. These phases are an effective method of tracing the steps in serial killing that Oates offers in Part Two of *Zombie*, "How Things Work Out." The aura phase begins in Q\_P\_ after he has been tried and given a suspended sentence for assaulting the university student. A voice, italicized in the text, becomes highly visible and influential in Q\_P\_'s thinking. He hears the voice first in his head; later it comes from the TV, then from his teeth. The voice takes precedence over all the usual buzzing, which occurs after he stops taking his lithium. For Q\_P\_, this is the aura phase and he is withdrawing from reality. According to Norris, once this phase begins, the killer's "other"

personality does not re-emerge until after the murder. In Oates's text, the signal that Q\_P\_ is entering this phase is threefold: he withdraws from his family after the trial; he loses track of time and place, waking in his car in other cities with no memory of getting there; he medicates himself with alcohol, drugs and caffeine.

The drug-alcohol usage combined with the withdrawal from lithium actively puts Q\_P\_ into the second of Norris's phases - the trolling phase, "an unconscious compulsion, a deliberate form of cruising" (24). For Q\_P\_, "the voice" directs the cruising. When the voice tells him "DON'T LOOK" (99), Q\_P\_ understands that the voice *wants* him to look. Following this inverted logic Q\_P\_ "discovers" Squirrel, emerging from a pool, "his swim trunks streaming water,...& his young muscle-hard body like something shining" (99). The trigger for the remaining phases of Squirrel's being stalked and killed is the moment of intense projection Q\_P\_ experiences when he sees the boy's face and states that it was "[e]nough like Barry's face to be his TWIN!" The memory of his friend Barry and this boy's shining image merge, and he immediately wants to possess the boy, even though to do so would violate all his self-imposed rules governing whom he can choose as a victim. Q\_P\_ admits that Barry and Squirrel are not that similar. "Barry was younger in my memory...& dark-haired" (99), but because he is in the trolling phase, Q\_P\_ can ignore the facts and believe that "NOW BARRY WAS RETURNED TO ME!" (100). Q\_P\_ had experienced Barry's friendship as love, and all indications in the text point to the fact that Barry was probably Q\_P\_'s first murder victim. Q\_P\_'s response to the perceived love of Barry was to drown him.

Q\_P\_ now transfers that paradigm onto his new love object, Squirrel, although he is not consciously aware that he will also kill Squirrel . At the moment, Q\_P\_ feels that Squirrel is now the "true zombie" (100) he has been trying to find all along.

While he is in the "trolling phase," Q\_P\_ systematically stalks his prey. He finds out that the boy works at the "Humpty Dumpty on Lakeview Boulevard" (105) , and writes , "Q\_P\_ CRAZY FOR SQUIRREL!!!" on the inside door of the bathroom cubicle. The thought of strangers reading his public declaration produces the first in a series of sexual highs Q\_P\_ will get from the experience - "What a fantastic fireball-power in my cock" (105), he says. He stalks the boy until he figures out his hours; he follows him as he rides his bicycle home, "No need even to be INVISIBLE" (106); he phones his home and leaves a message.

Once his research into Squirrel's daily routines and habits is completed, Q\_P\_ proceeds into Norris's phase three, the wooing phase. But rather than "[t]rying to disarm" his specimen (Norris 27), Quentin waits, like an artist, for the best medium for luring the innocent boy. "A plan was forming like a slow dream & I did not push or hurry it" (108). He does, however, encourage his creativity by going off his medication. Immediately, he has "less timidity of EYE CONTACT. I saw things normally not seen. & they sank in me & brooded" (108). Q\_P\_ begins to hallucinate. He is delusional and feels omnipotent and highly sexualized. When he splits he describes himself as "Fragment Q of the big comet pulled apart into clusters of fire...& it would collide with its target & explode" (109). The very idea of capturing Squirrel excites him sexually because it violates all the rules he has so

rigidly set about his specimens.

He] was a Caucasian upper-middle-class kid, a child...& not a black or a mixed breed & lots of people cared for & would miss at once. & would notify the police in a panic. For sure. & that excited me, too. For never in the past, not once to my knowledge had any cops anywhere known of my specimen's disappearance, let alone searched for them. & so this would be different, & I believed I would be equal to the challenge (109).

Watching his specimen becomes an erotic torture for Q\_P\_. Just observing Squirrel hoisting trays in Humpty Dumpty sends Q\_P\_ into the men's room to "jack off in one of the shower stalls moaning & whimpering" (112). Trying to gain control of his psyche, Q\_P\_ repeats his litany of what a true zombie would do for him (49-50). His "vision [is]fading in and out of focus" (112) from caffeine and uppers. Desire quickly turns to anger at the realization that Squirrel does not notice him:

*Why didn't Q\_P\_ have friends like that, guys who liked me? guys like brothers? twins? & now when they see me their eyes flick carelessly over me. Little cocksuckers don't see me at all... and the little fucker will pay for it one day soon (113).*

Quentin gets his next creative impulse on how to woo his victim when, in section 38, his private therapist, Dr.E\_, asks whether he has had any dreams - a question to which Quentin has answered "No" for the past sixteen months. Q\_P\_ says he's been dreaming of baby chicks. The last piece of his creative plan does not fall into place until section 44 when "FRAGMENT Q [is] primed TO EXPLODE" (134). He will lure the boy with the 36 baby chicks he has been keeping in the cellar - an innocent-looking ruse for an innocent boy bicycling home.

Four days later, in his Todd Cuttler disguise of "curly red-brown hair &

smooth moustache," (142) Q\_P\_ arrives at what he refers to as ground zero, the actual capture of his specimen - the fourth step according to Norris and "the penultimate moment" (28). The Todd Cuttler persona takes over the moment Q\_P\_ strong arms Squirrel. In the Todd disguise, Q\_P\_ is not only aroused, but fast, fierce and brutal. There is a total break with reality here, a dissociative event. After Q\_P\_ has covered the boy's face, he blacks out while attacking him. The writhing and moaning (146) of Squirrel only makes Todd more violent . Tying him until he is unable to move, he simultaneously bangs Squirrel's head against the floorboards and sexually assaults him. Later that evening, while he finishes mowing his grandmother's lawn so he can have an alibi, Q\_P\_ thinks making Squirrel into a zombie might still be possible. But when he returns to the van, the boy's bloody, distorted face and the terror in his eyes cause Q\_P\_ to switch again to his Todd Cuttler persona.

*A homely kid with blood-caked nostrils, I was getting pissed at him...MY ZOMBIE. FIGHTING ME...& fucking him in the ass, my cock enormous so the skin tore and bled...piercing to his guts like a sword. Who's your Master? Who's your Master? WHO'S YOUR MASTER? (152).*

Q\_P\_ captures and kills Squirrel, paralleling the fifth of Norris's seven phases in the activity pattern of the serial killer. Norris argues that when the serial killer is in the throes of inflicting violence, (as Q\_P\_ does in the scene described above), the killer has no free will. For this reason he cannot be judged by "traditional legal descriptions and cannot be evaluated by traditional criminological or psychoanalytical techniques" (36-37).

After the murder, Q\_P\_ returns to his normal guise - he is Quentin the

caretaker at 118 North Church. He shaves, combs his hair, and does not turn on the radio. "I did not know anything. I was not aware of anything" (154), he records in his chronicle. When the police come to question him about the boy's disappearance, he is temporarily paralysed with fear that they will find all the mementoes of his other failed zombies - polaroids of the dead bodies, Big Guy's glass frames and zebra-lined shirt, Raisineye's watch, No Name's tooth, Rooster's hand-tooled boots, Bunnygloves's fur-lined gloves. Only the hair he has kept as a memento from Squirrel is safely stored off the premises of his grandmother's house on North Church Street. When Q\_P\_ lists all the souvenirs he has saved from his victims, he is demonstrating narratively what Norris would call the totem phase, the sixth step in Norris's serial killer pattern. Despite the psychopathic behaviour, the apparent dissociation from the actual murder, Q\_P\_ is not confused. He can still think. Armed with the knowledge that the police cannot enter his house until they have a warrant, Q\_P\_ buys himself enough time to dispose of all the photos and mementoes of his failed attempts at making a zombie.

Now Q\_P\_ parallels the sixth of Norris's seven phases. He becomes depressed. Q\_P\_ goes back on lithium to help him with the despondent feelings he has after murdering Squirrel. According to Norris, "[t]he reasons for the depression phase lie in the emotional premises of the murder itself: the killer is simply acting out a ritualistic fantasy" (33). Q\_P\_'s sense of failure will not last long, however. Even as he is getting rid of the mementoes of his dead specimens, he has the perspicuity to keep the dental tool he has stolen from his dentist's office

because "there were other specimens waiting, I did not doubt" (159).

Q\_P\_ indicates in his chronicle that the circle is beginning again. This realization mirrors Norris's seventh phase of a serial killer's activities: his uncontrollable urges overtake him again (34). Fantasies reassemble in Q\_P\_'s mind. This time the specimen will be a Caribbean student who lives under the same roof as Q\_P\_. Again he will be violating his strict rule about never taking a specimen from his rooming house, but he will rationalize it by forming a plan to ostensibly drive his victim to the airport for his holidays and then make him disappear. Q\_P\_ figures out how to appear innocent with the new zombie target, all the while repeating to himself that it will never happen under his grandmother's roof. Q\_P\_'s repetition of the prohibition is a clear indication that he is obsessed with doing just this. It indicates that the cycle of stalking and murder will most certainly happen again.

Nothing in Q\_P\_'s chronicle, not even his twenty-three naive-looking drawings, is superfluous. The drawings are part of a visual scrapbook of significant activities and moments for Q\_P\_. First is a sketch of the rear of his 1987 Ford van. Like Q\_P\_, the vehicle is invisible in its ordinariness. It is the "color of wet sand" (4). An American flag decal on the back window and the bumper sticker which says "I BRAKE FOR ANIMALS" establish the driver as patriotic and caring - just like any good American. The second picture, a clock without hands, establishes an ominous tone regarding Q\_P\_'s mental state. The text accompanying the drawing establishes that there was a particular moment in high school when "things began to

go fast” (6) for Q\_P\_. He later tells us that he “PEELED OFF THE CLOCK HANDS” when Barry drowned.<sup>60</sup> The text above the picture of the clock on page six tells the reader that Q\_P\_ declared himself outside time and therefore outside normal restrictions when he broke the clock hands off. The act is his declaration that time for him is *inside*, meaning “you do what *you* want” (6).

Eyes are a prominent pattern in Q\_P\_'s drawings, a neat obverse to his pathological fear of making eye contact with people. There are dead eyes staring at him preventing him from having an erection (29); his father's eyes peer through the still-latched door to his apartment just after he has murdered Bunnygloves (32); the textbook illustration of how to insert an ice pick "through the bony orbit above the eyeball" is photocopied for the scrapbook (41). Q\_P\_ draws a picture of how his own eyes looked after he was randomly attacked, so impressed was he with the "bloodshot-blackened EYES UNKNOWN TO ME" (60) which stared back at him from the mirror. He was delighted that he could be so disguised. It makes him understand that he can "habit a FACE NOT KNOWN...I could EAT YOUR HEART & asshole you'd never know it" (60). This realization becomes an important factor in his assuming disguises for other serial killings.

Q\_P\_'s history of violence began when he was seven years old. There is a drawing included in the chronicle to mark this. It is a large drawing of his playmate

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<sup>60</sup>The drowning accident is described on page 100 in the text: “ & so many kids yelling & wild & tossing volleyballs it wasn't noticed until we were all almost out of the pool.” Three things in the text suggest that Q\_P\_ killed him: first, the fact that he remarks that no one noticed; second, the fact that for years Q\_P\_ kept a sock of Barry's as a souvenir; third, that according to Q\_P\_'s mother, he has never been the same since the accident.

Bruce's eyeglasses (64). Q\_P\_ was accused by Bruce and Bruce's parents, of "*purposefully*" trying to tangle Bruce's head and neck "in the swing chains" (63) . Q\_P\_ , amazingly cunning for his age, inverts the story, declaring that it was Bruce who had threatened to strangle him because he "wouldn't touch his thing" (63). His mother hugs him and his father says it is "all right" (64). The family collusion has begun. For years afterwards, Q\_P\_ keeps Bruce's glasses hidden in the attic. Q\_P\_ had felt "a secret connection" with Bruce. That connection was not reciprocated. Q\_P\_ was pushed away for standing "too close" (62) to Bruce and his friends in line at school. His desire to have Bruce, to *be* Bruce, which Q\_P\_ records in his chronicle, shows abnormal desire and obsessiveness for a child of seven. The memory of Bruce's back becomes the stuff of his sexual fantasies later on. His consolation, even at age seven, is to transgress boundaries and actually merge with Bruce. Sometimes a "door opened in my dream & I *was* BRUCE" (62).

Q\_P\_ draws some of the instruments he uses in his experiments. First is the deadly ice pick which he purchases at a crossroads store on the Lake Michigan shore, his appearance changed by "a week's growth of beard" (51), dark glasses and a winter parka, his voice purposely hoarse-sounding. Thinking he looks like a completely different person, Q\_P\_ purposefully makes conversation with the cash register attendant to ensure that he will never be targeted for buying the ice pick as a murder weapon. "*These ice picks, huh? - fucking Michigan winter,*" Q\_P\_ says (51). Later that same night he practices:

the ice pick in my hand poking & prodding & thrusting into

its target & so EXCITED suddenly with no warning I come in my pants before I can fucking unzip (52).

Q\_P\_ also draws a delicate dental instrument, stolen from his dentist's office, which he will use in the transorbital lobotomies he will perform. He does not draw the fish-gutting knives, the sponges, the rope, the tape or the "operating" table which he uses on his struggling specimens. Presumably these are all inside the locked basement door he draws on page 110.

Other drawings in the text show Q\_P\_'s souvenirs from his failed zombies. Only some of them are illustrated, however. He omits the good luck charm from Big Guy, (the victim's penis in formaldehyde), and the magazines, Polaroids and videos, he keeps locked up. Rooster's boots are illustrated (78), as is No-Name's gold tooth, drawn to actual size (84). The last drawing in the text, a bracelet woven from his and Squirrel's hair twisted together with red yarn (180), is a good representation of the circle of serial killing. Each souvenir shows him that he has tried to connect in love with his chosen specimens. To "love" his victims, Q\_P\_ needed to possess them, and to possess them involved murdering them. But murder was not the reason he wanted a zombie. His obsessive fantasy is to possess an object to love. Unfortunately, Q\_P\_ understands love as absolute control and mastery over someone who can never hurt or reject him.

The whole text, then, including Q\_P\_'s drawings, represents a mapping of the autonomous narrative of an exhaustingly sick mind - one which will not stop wreaking damage on innocent people until he too is a metaphorical zombie - dead.

The terror in reading this book, in going on the journey inside Q\_P\_'s brain, is that the reader gradually becomes aware that for this kind of mind, *rehabilitation is not possible*. Q\_P\_ cannot, like other characters created by Oates, emotionally surmount what is going on in his brain because his neurological wiring is defective. He does not take in information or react to events like other people. Q\_P\_ is a true monster, and the terror is that the reader cannot say that he is not human. It is true that Q\_P\_ lacks many of the traits of a normal human - the ability to make emotional ties with people, the understanding of boundaries between people, and the acknowledgement at the emotional level that there are actions which are wrong. Q\_P\_ has no feeling of wrong, although he has many feelings of anger. Joy is something he experiences either when he sees the next victim and understands that this is "the one," or when he feels his penis become engorged as he considers violating a person. Reason does not always dominate in Q\_P\_'s mind, yet cunning and the ability to execute these horrors and cover his tracks do. It is here that the conundrum of the text lies. The engaged reader feels revulsed by Q\_P\_'s chronicle. How is it possible to be human and act in this manner: to convince officials and medical professionals alike that you are making progress; to hold down what looks like a responsible job, all the while living an entirely different life based on compulsions which never reach satiety?

The idea of dissociation Oates is exploring in this text is an absolute severance of thought, feelings and actions. Q\_P\_ suffers from a thought disorder, unnamed in the text. Readers are given indications all through the text that he has

strong paranoid tendencies. He is on the medication lithium, which could indicate a variety of illnesses. In any case, Oates gives enough information for the reader to conclude that Q\_P\_ suffers from a psychosis, which editors Moore and Fine define in their book, *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, as a severe mental disorder "characterized by marked ego and libidinal regression with subsequent severe personality disorganization" (156). He is a very sick man, not from trauma that he experienced or witnessed but from missing neurological connections, or possibly a difference in the way he receives or decodes information from the outside world.

Whether his condition completely deprives Q\_P\_ of free will in Oates's text is a moot point. Sometimes Q\_P\_ presents himself in the chronicle as mulling over an option. He considers speaking to the police without his lawyer present, for example. His lawyer, afraid that he will confess to a murder, quickly quells the notion. He considers killing his grandmother and her friend and dismisses it for the time being. When Q\_P\_ reaches the point in his project that he can see in the victim's eyes that the specimen "knows" something - who Q\_P\_ is, what is about to happen to him - he reaches a point where there is no turning back. This moment is always announced in capital letters. Here there is clear indication of a psychotic split which will result in the death of another specimen. Norris calls splits like Q\_P\_'s "episodic explosions of violence" (36), and argues that when serial killers are in states such as this they are not in control of themselves. They are unable to distinguish right and wrong and have a significantly diminished ability to judge their own activities objectively. They have lost their free will. At such times they do not

neatly fit traditional legal descriptions of sanity and cannot be evaluated by traditional criminological or psychoanalytical techniques.

Readers want some hope of change or at least a redemptive note in the texts they read. In Oates's *Zombie* this is missing, just as all the normal feelings of human connection and sense of conscience are absent in *Q\_P\_*. At the end of eight years writing novels which explore the effects of trauma on the human brain, Oates comes to a wall. She has taken the idea of fragmentation, dissociation and splitting and played them out in a number of texts, some of them in a way that mirrors the medical descriptions of those words quite closely, some that use the ideas as a jumping off point for a metaphoric look at different levels of fragmentation operating in the modern mind. In *Zombie*, it is impossible to go further on Jung's continuum of dissociation. Oates's narration in *Zombie* is not another look at fragmentation, dissociation or splitting as the result of wounding or trauma. There are, however, triggers operating in this text. In *Zombie*, the flash points are not the same kind of complex associations that have been examined in other texts in this study. They are, rather, the episodic explosions of violence characteristic of psychosis. Some of the activities that lower *Q\_P\_*'s threshold for having a psychotic episode,<sup>61</sup> such as the excessive use of alcohol and drugs, are the same activities that trigger dissociative-like episodes in other of Oates's texts. The

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<sup>61</sup>According to Moore and Fine, the phenomenological characteristics of the psychoses are, to a greater or lesser degree, bizarre behaviour, delusional ideas, inappropriate labile and intense affective reactions, withdrawal, and a significant disturbance in the sense of reality and reality testing.

significant difference between those texts and *Zombie* is in the extremity of the disconnection in Q\_P\_'s mind, and the fact that the most important connection between heart and head is severed. The reader feels revulsion and nausea at what is happening in the text while being acutely aware that Q\_P\_ does not feel the same way. This strategy on Oates's part carries immense impact. Being inside the serial killer's head, trapped in the text, looking out, yet having an intense emotional response to the guiltlessly performed, carefully planned murders is almost unbearable emotionally. This chasm between the reader with a moral conscience and the serial killer without one does not even allow the reader to hate because this type of person may have been born with faulty neurological wiring, suffered brain damage, or in cases *other* than Q\_P\_'s, been traumatized at a young age.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Norris reaches the conclusion that:  
“[S]erial murder is a disease based on “primal” qualities of their violent behavior, the similar pattern of brain dysfunction and learning disabilities that each of them evidences, the similarities in the results of biochemical tests...remarkable consistencies of their reactions to institutionalization [i.e. thriving in this controlled environment].” (37).

## Conclusion

*I am very emotional - I believe that the "storm" of emotion constitutes our human tragedy, if anything does. It's our constant battle with nature (Nature), trying to subdue chaos outside and inside ourselves, occasionally winning small victories, then being swept along by some cataclysmic event of our own making. (Joyce Carol Oates )*

*As Anne Tyler once remarked, "A hundred years from now, they'll laugh at us for taking [Joyce] for granted." (Johnson)*

Joyce Carol Oates is in the mainstream of American literary tradition. For years she has been at the cutting edge of that tradition without being adequately recognized for her achievement in precisely and unblinkingly portraying the decline of America: its splitting along racial and economic lines, the dissociation caused by alcohol and drugs, and the violence and emotional wounding people inflict when under their influence. *The New York Times* has consistently reviewed her books and published her perspicacious articles. Numerous books and academic articles have been written on her work, yet the idea stubbornly remains both in academia and in the public mind that there is something wrong with Oates's writing. The "something wrong" has been attributed to her immense literary output,<sup>63</sup> her obsessive interest in the lower-class citizens and barren terrain of upper New York State, the pain that is present in her work. None of these things, however, has anything to do with

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<sup>63</sup>See James Wolcott's article for *Harper's*, Sept., 1982, entitled "Stop Me Before I Write Again."

artistry. In an article Oates wrote for the *New York Times* in 1995 entitled, “Confronting Head On the Face of the Afflicted,”<sup>64</sup> Oates asked why, when a critic considers certain art “too ‘raw’” to be reviewed, it “shouldn’t ... be witnessed, in any case, as integral to cultural history?” (22). She continued:

Many of our human stories end not in triumph but in defeat.  
To demand that victimized persons transcend their pain in order  
to make audiences feel good is another kind of tyranny (22).

Critics cannot keep up with Oates because there are rarely intervals between her works. She frequently writes shorter works while planning larger works, as in the case of writing *Black Water* while amassing the notes she needed for her Ulysses-like *What I Lived For*, published in 1994. Critics are not articulating powerfully enough how adept Oates is at bringing the reader directly inside the character’s brain. Her explorations of the psyche are not fashioned as traditional interior monologues so much as maps that unmask the mind as it connects experience to memory. She exposes her characters’ responses to trauma, clearly showing how the fissures in their personalities and the unhealed cracks affect their lives. Oates’s characters are always struggling to negotiate around the encapsulated fragments that protect their hearts from emotionally re-experiencing trauma. While they are truly wounded, they are not defeated. In her writing, Oates heads directly to that part of the brain that fascinates her - the intersection of deeply ingrained memory

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<sup>64</sup>Oates wrote the article in response to *The New Yorker*’s dance critic Arlene Croce’s refusal to review a dance work which had “terminally ill ‘real’ persons in the program”(1). Croce’s argument was that having “real” persons in the production placed it outside criticism. She named this type of art “victim art” - a “raw art...deadly in its power over the human conscience...seek[ing] to manipulate audience” (1).

and intense emotion captured in a fragment of a personality. This is the place where things really happen in Oates's texts. The dynamic is like a flame, a match struck to paper. For readers accustomed to lengthy introductions to a character, Oates's method can appear careless or fragmentary. It is neither of the two. The author's approach to exploring the mind is to begin *in media res*.

Oates's work, according to Annie Proulx, shows "an omnivorous intellect, a taste for experimentation and a raptor's eye for American society and culture" (D3). Her texts are multi-levelled and complex. They echo her predecessors in the English and American literary canons and push the artistic form of the novel in new directions. Oates authorial voice is very distinct. While she might employ an ironic tone in her narrator, she rarely uses a narrator whose detachment is born of a nihilistic view; nor does she rely on camera-eye voyeurism that has achieved cult-like status in the latter third of the twentieth century. Readers are thoroughly accustomed to the multi-angled lenses of the camera through which observing eyes can filter experiences for the audience. These lenses and angles allow readers the comfort of distance and detachment. In an article written for *The Georgia Review* in 1983, Oates criticized the falsification this notional use of lenses can effect:

[M]ost celebrated twentieth-century writers have presented Woman through the distorting lens of sexist imaginations - sometimes with courtly subtlety, sometimes with a ferocious indignation that erupts in violence" (7).

Comfort or distance is not what Oates's writing is about. Her narrators do not give readers a choice about remaining detached. Readers feel inexplicably implicated in

the terrible things that happen to Oates's characters, and deeply disconcerted. By not allowing her readers to be detached from scenes she is depicting, Oates insists that the reader engage the problem and confront its immorality or atrocity. Her lack of popularity among the general public and the critical attacks made on her spring primarily from other people's defensiveness about being enmeshed in any way with Oates's subject matter. After all, what she speaks of is what polite society resists confronting. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner drew on an image of Caddy's muddy drawers, which symbolized his conviction that fear of miscegenation was crippling America; in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Wharton repeatedly emphasized the dire consequences for women who transgress accepted social conventions regarding behaviour and marriage. In Oates's texts from 1987 to 1995, her artistic vision echoes Marcellus's statement in Hamlet that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I:iv 90). Oates's narrative opinion that something is very wrong is borne out by her emphasis on the continuing racial split in America, the psychological split in persons who have experienced trauma, and the rippling-out effect of trauma when a fragmented person's complex is triggered.

Oates's accurate rendering of the suffering her subjects endure when they become victims of violence, trauma, abuse, or power imbalances is somehow elided by critics with Oates as a person. She inflames righteous readers who hold her responsible for the abuses she witnesses and reveals in her text, even when the material of her narratives can be found in a sensational form in daily newspapers,

and seen in a more provocative and offensive manner on television talk shows and in films. Why is Oates's singled out for such disdain when contemporaries like her friend John Updike garner consistent acclaim despite his having an authorial voice that is sometimes voyeuristic? Why do some readers want to personally attack her for what they claim are unduly violent or twisted narratives? Such anger is not directed at popular writers like Stephen King or Ann Rice. In an essay Oates wrote for *The New York Times Book Review* in response to such accusations, entitled "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?" Oates called the very question "insulting, ignorant, and 'always sexist'... Any worthwhile writer 'bears witness' to the brutal realities of the age" (Johnson 309), she states. Her writing reflects what is occurring in the United States today. It is accomplished with emotional accuracy, intellectual integrity, and psychological realism. All this is done without a hint of salacious voyeurism, an achievement few authors writing on such subjects could claim. Her texts in this period are compelling, if not always pleasurable reading. All the texts except *Zombie* offer hope, for the protagonists successfully struggle to extricate themselves from the situations that have wounded them and triggered their dissociations.

Each of the texts discussed in this thesis makes different use of ideas in the theory of dissociation. In *You Must Remember This*, Oates uses the Jungian idea of a complex, an autonomous fragment that is "strongly accentuated emotionally" and has a "powerful inner coherence" (Jung, *Structures and Dynamics* 96) as an axis around which she turns her characters. She explores Enid Stevick's strong

association of sex with death after the assault by her Uncle Felix; she locates the roots of Lyle's conscious wish to die in the unconscious repression of his true self; she exposes Felix's quest for fame in the boxing ring and his need to dominate others as a result of what writer George Garrett calls "a deep, powerful urge to wound others" (*OB* 28). Brother Warren Stevick is literally fragmented in the Korean War and psychologically fragmented after it. He speaks of himself in the third person in letters sent home during the War and again after a failed love affair when he rejoins those protesting U.S. war preparations. Warren's political hero, Adlai Stevenson, cannot heal him any more than Lyle's philosophical hero Schopenhauer can guide Lyle. Wife and mother Hanna Stevick, mute for most of the text, exhibits her mental state through somatic complaints until she finds her voice working as a dressmaker. Oates's strongest focus on dissociation in *You Must Remember This* is reserved for Enid. She must dissociate in her intense, often brutal sexual encounters with her uncle to protect that small fragment of herself that will negotiate an escape from Port Oriskany, the site of her abuse, when she is old enough to attend university. After her initial suicide attempt, the dissociated fragment that saves Enid from complete breakdown is in her innate talent for music. Through music she can escape from the emotional and physical pain she suffers whenever Felix's complex about not belonging is triggered and he acts out his need by establishing his domination over her.

Dissociation through alcohol abuse is Oates's focus in *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. A phrase from the Platters' song "The Great

Pretender”- *I seem to be what I'm not you see* - aptly describes how the characters in this text operate. Surface personas hide the needs of the heart. Most of the characters turn to alcohol rather than dealing directly with their feelings. Oates examines the progressive dissociation and final psychosis in Persia Courtney’s alcoholism., and the trickle-down effect her illness has on the future of her daughter. Between her mother’s drinking and her father’s compulsive gambling Iris must and does form a hard cuticle around her heart that allows her to negotiate the dysfunctional family situation, and the guilt she shares with the black character Jinx Fairchild when he kills to protect her. Their shared secret about the murder provides a study of what it actually means to be black in America, a country split along racial lines. Iris’s life is curtailed by Red Garlock’s death, in much the same way as her mother’s alcoholism limited her options, but because Iris is white, intelligent, and musically gifted, she can and does escape, at least socially and financially. What she cannot achieve because of her emotional traumas growing up in an alcoholic household is integration of her deepest self into the new persona she has created for her new life in Syracuse. She must live with a permanently fractured self, always wary, cynical and untrusting. Jinx’s heart does not have the hardened cuticle that protects Iris in traumatic situations because he has come from a family with a loving mother. Jinx , however, loses much more than Iris because he has only one good ticket out of the ghetto - his talent for basketball. Once that is destroyed by his escalating guilt at killing Garlock and his agreement to purposely lose a championship ball game for his racketeering brother, a series of events is set

in motion from which no Fairchild will escape unscathed. Jinx, who was once assured of a rosy future, is now burdened with a promiscuous alcoholic, wife and two small children; his mother Minnie loses the job that gave her dignity and her other son, Sugar Baby, to a brutal and degrading murder. Because of these traumatic events, she too descends into alcoholism. Jinx grabs what remains of his life and joins the army, the very place where his father's vocal cords had been crushed by white soldiers. Jinx's enlistment means that he is choosing death with dignity in a war over a life without possibilities. In the end, Jinx Fairchild has changed more than Iris Courtney has and demonstrates more heroism than she despite the narrow range of options open to him.

The artist as dissociative subject is the focus of Oates novella *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. As an artist Calla must access her imagination, a task possible only when her creativity is triggered. Tyrell Thompson draws Calla by his melodious voice, his blackness, and his ability to locate underground streams. The part of Calla that is an artist has no free will where Tyrell is concerned. With him "she would have no will, except to acquiesce" (65). Calla's desire to merge with the water diviner almost costs her her life. Metaphorically speaking, her failure to die with Tyrell means that she will live out her life as a failed artist. A chorus of narrators spanning three generations recites Calla's story in fragments drawn from memory, family tales and community gossip. The melody of the three voices, usually italicized in the text, intersects and harmonizes. The effect is of a chorus of voices patching together the narrative of a female artist. The centre of the text

becomes a single dissociative event that provides both the form and the content: Calla's journey out of the Freilicht household to the brink of suicide. The novella provides a study of depression manifesting itself in a family, a marriage and a community and traces the personality change which occurs in Calla when her suicide attempt is unsuccessful. All this is achieved through a layering of narrative versions. Calla uses her failed suicide attempt as an excuse for abandoning her creativity. In her attic space she relives her loss, obsessively recalling the labour pains that came at “unpredictable intervals sharp and stabbing... rose and broke, rose and broke” (95), when she tried and failed to deliver her art. Calla is dissociated from her true self. She is the *artiste manqué*.

Oates uses Kathleen Hennessy, her agreeable but not too intelligent protagonist in *The Rise of Life on Earth*, to demonstrate how trauma, like a pebble dropped in still water, causes a destructive ripple effect. Kathleen has been emotionally and physically wounded by the beatings she has received at her drunken father's hands. As a direct result of one of these beatings, Kathleen, fearing further abuse from her father, has killed her sister, Nola, whose screams she cannot quell. This is the first instance in the text that shows the link between being wounded and hurting others. This pattern that Kathleen has learned at a very young age will be repeated throughout Oates's text. The violent assaults Kathleen experiences affect “the whole organization of [her] psyche” (LaPlanche 466). The murders that Kathleen commits occur only when Kathleen's complex of emotions is triggered - when she is made to feel belittled, invisible, inferior, rejected or replaced. The

triggering is identified in the novella by a physical sensation Kathleen has of fiery red ants crawling on her skin. Ants indicate that she is about to experience a split in her mind. What she does next, whether it is smother a patient, introduce pathogens into intravenous lines or set a fire are all done while she is in this dissociated state. When her anger has abated, she returns to her normal, overly agreeable, bovine-like personality, one that authorities would not target as a murder suspect. Oates shows that Kathleen is victimized by men. She does as she is told sexually because that is what she has learned from her father's physical abuse. She has dissociative episodes when she has sex and wakes up without knowledge of what has occurred. It is only when a man stains her skirt with his semen that her conscious rage flares. The stain represents what Kathleen believes herself to be - contaminated. The effort to remove all contaminants from her environment make her an overly zealous nurse's aide. She has a frighteningly obsessive attachment to hospital medical procedures, especially those to do with corpses, but no one notices her.

Oates's narrator makes a point of emphasizing the long-term effects of rage caused by Mr. Hennessy and others like him. Kathleen works in five different hospitals or nursing homes in her career, smoothly moving on whenever a red flag of suspicion is raised.. She views death as a state of serenity, proof that no more can be done to hurt that person. Death is a state Kathleen craves for herself. While she is alive, there is always the danger of emotional or sexual penetration, such as she experienced with Dr. Orson Abbott. While high on drugs, Abbott forces her to engage in brutal sex and belittles her position at the hospital. Deaths result from

Orson's treatment of Kathleen, yet the most brutal retaliation she takes is on herself, when she aborts Orson's child by her own hand. During the abortion, Kathleen again enters a dissociative state. She is detached, procedural, viewing herself as contaminated. The abortion is the ultimate act of self abuse, for by performing the procedure, Kathleen is depriving herself of what she had always craved - someone who would love her.

In *Black Water* Oates employs dissociation in a unique way by demonstrating the functioning of the mind when the body is in hopeless circumstances. At first, the horror, pain, and hopelessness of the submerged car overwhelms Kelly Kelleher, but nearly simultaneously a mind-body dissociation occurs that allows her to cope in her last two hours. One fragment of her mind blocks out all physical discomfort. Kelly then focuses all her conscious energy on seeking out air pockets to keep her alive. The other fragment continuously replays old memories, snatches of magazine advertising, and information about unresolved family matters, giving the dying girl the impression that, even trapped in this car, she has life. The idealism she has imbibed about being an American girl keeps her optimistic that her prince charming, the Senator, will surely return to rescue her. She plays the scenario again and again - he will pull open the door, he will bring help, but of course, none of this happens. The dissociative idea also works on the novel's subtext about the birth of twins, one articulate and strong, the other mute and in danger of dying. A further dissociative idea is to be found in considering the two people trapped in the car, the twins, as dissociated parts of one another. One

part is strong, articulate and political; the other is quiet and reticent, but immensely imaginative and resourceful.

In *Foxfire*, Oates's concern is twofold: the author explores how a group of young lower-class, socially ostracized women who are vulnerable from fractured and dysfunctional family units can achieve power; secondly, Oates's narrator is concerned with the potential for catastrophe when that group has power but lacks the maturity of judgement to use it well. The dissociative ideas in *Foxfire* are broader than in other texts. With the *Foxfire* gang, the complexes work as a single unit triggering acts of revenge. All the gang members have intense anger at their social ostracization and because of their poor parenting. In addition they share low self-esteem and an equally low socio-economic status. When a demeaning incident happens to one girl, for example, the emotional complexes of all the girls are set off and they spring into action to get revenge. As the number of revenge activities escalates, the revenge activities become more brutal and the law is transgressed. Everything changes once the gang comes up against the law. Legs (Margaret) Sadovosky, the acknowledged leader of the gang, has an overblown obsession to protect the weak because her alcoholic father never protected her. Seeing her own neediness reflected in these girls, Legs brings them together in a common cause - to gain power and social currency for the group by taking revenge on anyone who harms a *Foxfire* girl. The revenge activities escalate in violence as the gang tastes power and is unequipped to deal with it. The turning point in these revenge activities comes when Legs violates a law by pulling a knife on rival gang leader,

Vince Roper, and steals Acey Holman's car for a joyride. The gang is no longer able to operate outside the law and Legs goes to jail. Loss of freedom transforms Legs into a fanatic. After she is released from jail she sets the final kidnapping plan in motion, but plans go awry, Mr. Kellogg is shot and the Foxfire gang ends. The series of triggers that have propelled the gang in the end bring it nowhere. Only Maddy and Rita who have left the gang before the kidnapping go forward.

Oates's Foxfire gang is modelled on the gangs of the fifties. The gang is doomed from the start because Legs is just an image they have idealized. The girls see her as a superhuman creature able to negotiate for them in the rough neighbourhood they inhabit; in reality Legs only has the ability to keep running. She is only half of what the gang needs. The other half is found in Maddy Wirtz, whom Legs refers to as "her heart." Maddy's personal boundaries are intact. She has good judgement and thoughtfully considers the paths the Foxfire group take. Maddy is able to leave the gang when their activities escalate to serious criminal offenses like kidnapping. Maddy chronicles the confessions of the Foxfire gang. She has the power to minutely observe the activities and shape the narrative of the Foxfire girls. The text she produces illustrates that, as a gang, the group acts in response to a series of triggers, all of which involve getting revenge. Revenge is revealed as a solution of the moment in Maddy's chronicle, not an instrument for change. The text demonstrates that a group only has the power to effect change when its leaders have values that promote reconciliation and growth.

*Zombie* is the only one of Oates's texts published between 1987 and 1995 in

which the author finds no redemptive thread to weave through her narrative. Q\_P\_ represents the existence of evil in the world. This serial killer is a psychopath and the product of a mis-wired neurological system. There is no cure for what is wrong with him. Medication will stop his aberrant behaviour, but only if he faithfully takes it. When Q\_P\_ is on his medication he misses the intensities, the highs of his obsessive compulsions. He frequently quits his prescriptions and exists on a cocktail of alcohol, drugs and caffeine to work his system into a frenzy. Even when he is on medication, Q\_P\_ must recite a mantra of prohibitions to prevent himself from transgressing boundaries, by which he means performing lobotomies on people. All Q\_P\_'s desires centre on having someone to do his bidding sexually. He appears to have two feelings - an obsessive need to be loved by someone whom he can dominate completely, and explosive rage when that need is frustrated in any way. Rage triggers a personality change in Q\_P\_. Then the lowly caretaker becomes the brutal Todd Cuttler. This other personality emerges when manipulation of the victim is required before capture and when extra strength and brutality is called for in dealing with the victim..

The most horrifying aspect of *Zombie* is that Q\_P\_ is so highly manipulative that he will never be caught. He can assume the precise personae his therapist, probation officer, sister or parents would like to see. In fact, he enjoys this aspect of his life and he views it as a challenge he can meet. Q\_P\_ is the face of evil in our midst and he is invisible. He is already under the umbrella of the social and medical systems, and so is viewed notionally at least as taken care of. Reading about Q\_P\_

is a destabilizing experience. Q\_P\_ is beyond any definition of dissociation. The malfunction in his mind is permanent and irreparable. He does, however, have splits caused by his anger at his victims' resisting his invasive transorbital lobotomy procedure. These are dissociative, but it is not as if he can return to a normal operating self when they are over. He is much more troubled than the classic case of psychotic splits we saw in Kathleen Hennessy in *The Rise of Life on Earth*. Kathleen at least had a feeling that was translated into a somatic sensation - fiery red ants - before she dissociated. There is no such warning with Q\_P\_. He may put on or take off a disguise, but the feeling of change does not register because he stands outside feeling. While Q\_P\_ is a serial murderer to the world, in his own mind he is a scientist, doing a procedure that would make his father proud - that is, if he could tell his father about it. The lobotomies raise his status in his own mind - from lowly caretaker to man of science. Q\_P\_'s journal is an exhausting narrative of a very sick mind. He will not cease doing what he is doing until he too is dead. Oates's presentation of the killer in our midst holds no comfort, for although her portrait is a fictional one, people like Q\_P\_ exist in the world. Oates is issuing a warning about the face of humanity no one wants to see.

Oates may have reached the most extreme example of a dissociated personality in *Zombie*, yet she has not stopped using the ideas of dissociation. In her latest novel, *Blonde*, she takes the same concepts of trauma, fragmenting and dissociation and externalizes them in a novel written on the life of Norma Jean Baker before and after she became the icon Marilyn Monroe. Oates has

conceptualized and executed a brilliant picture of her short, bleak career as an abused, fragmented, and addicted actress. The premise for dissociation is the same as it has been in six of the seven novels discussed in this thesis. For Norma Jean there is early abuse by her schizophrenic mother. The child is forced into scalding hot bath water to cleanse herself of contamination; the mother inculcates the child with the idea that her father is a famous film star who has rejected his daughter. Norma's burden is huge: an abusive mother too ill to meet her needs, an absent father, an orphanage and a foster home after her mother is committed to a hospital facility. When she is pushed into marriage by her foster mother at age 16, she calls her husband Daddy. Norma Jean's desire to be loved by a father figure results in a compulsion to please her other husbands - she will view this man and her subsequent husbands- the Ex-Ballplayer and the Playwright - all as father figures, calling them all Daddy, or variations of the name. Norma's elision of sex with father figures results in a compulsion to please all men sexually because she feels that she exists only when she is recognized by a man. In this text Oates is able to call upon all her previous explorations of dissociation and fragmentation in the personality to skillfully re-present the operation of these ideas, externalized as roles that Marilyn undertook to play on screen.

Oates's narrator stresses that Norma always knew she was not Marilyn, but that she believed Marilyn was the person she must become to be loved. The change from Norma Jean to Monroe was accomplished in sessions with the make-up artist Whitey that frequently lasted hours. As she became Monroe, Norma simultaneously

took on the character role she was preparing to play. This double-switching is present throughout the text - first Monroe, then the character role. Monroe frequently demanded extensive re-takes for a scene. Oates portrays this habit as the way she coaxed the role personality out. "She would demand as many takes as required for her initial scene...until her Norma Jean armor was worn down & tremulous fearful forgiving Rosylyn emerged" (Oates *Blonde* 650). Oates implies strongly that Monroe's acting genius in film was the direct result of her early trauma. Because her personal boundaries were transgressed at an early age, she truly became the people she played. This personality switching into her character roles, however, resulted in stunning performances and disastrous personal strain.. Oates's narrative description of the personality changes is a precise rendering, in the context of film- making, of the idea of multiple personality. The switch-process is externalized in the make-up man; the personalities are externalized in the roles Norma plays as Monroe. For readers who reject Oates's stories about the inner workings of the minds of the fragmented, unattractive and marginalized people of upper New York state, for readers who are repulsed by the descriptions of abuse in other of her texts, this novel will be more palatable - not because it does not concern horrible and ongoing abuse in Monroe's life - by studio executives and doctors, by lovers - but because Monroe is already an icon. Her beauty is timeless because of her early death; her *face* decades later is still able to sell the idea of the unthinking female sex object, whose only pleasure is in serving men sexually. Oates gets everything right in this novel. Since she is showing personality change through

acting roles , she can eliminate the italicized voices, gaps and switches that are so jarring to readers who want to read smooth prose. Oates will not be criticized in *Blonde*, as she has been so often in other texts, of having a gruesome and twisted imagination. The Monroe story, hundreds of versions of it, is already in the public domain. Oates, however, fills a big gap with *Blonde*. She recreates, with deep compassion the hurt child, the injured heart that lies at the base of so many of her texts. In French, the word *Blonde* means girlfriend, or sweetheart. Oates shows in *Blonde* how the sweet heart of Norma Jean Baker was broken.

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