Joyce Carol Oates was born on June 16 1938 in Lockport, New York. She grew up on her parents' farm, outside the town, and went to the same one-room schoolhouse her mother had attended. This rural area of upstate New York, straddling Niagara and Erie Counties, had been hit hard by the Great Depression. The few industries which the area enjoyed also suffered frequent closures and layoffs. Farm families worked desperately hard to sustain meager subsistence. However, Oates enjoyed the natural environment of farm country, and displayed a precocious interest in books and writing. Although her parents had little education, they encouraged her ambitions. When, at age 14, her grandmother Blanche gave her first typewriter, she began consciously preparing herself, "writing novel after novel" throughout high school and college. She was a voracious reader; by the time she was in her teens she was devouring Henry David Thoreau, Ernest Hemingway, Emily Bronte and William Faulkner. She states:

> I think we are most influenced when we are adolescents. Whoever you read when you're fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen are probably the strongest influences of your whole life.

She adds:

> I think it's true for all artists: as an adolescent you don't have much background, you don't know much. I can imagine a young artist who's say, thirteen years old and seeing Cezanne for the first time being very, very overwhelmed. But it's not going to have the same impact when you're forty. [1]

The thesis will dwell upon the five selected novels of Oates namely, A Garden of Earthly Delights (1966), Expensive People (1968), them (1969), The Falls (2004) and Black Girl/White Girl (2006). The study will attempt to locate how violence has been represented in

Oates' text and how her characters also use violence as a tool to transcend the hopeless situation in which they unwillingly find themselves. Oates' own life was marked by chaos, violence and dark twists of fate that beset her fictional characters and creates her obsession with what she calls "the phantasmagoria of personality". As a girl, she was shadowed by emotional terrors and was drawn at an early age into an intensely private world of the intellect and imagination. Her fiction, therefore, is always violent with a particular focus on obsessive states of mind. Oates' fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence. At the heart of violence in her world, is the absolute and utter inability to affirm oneself – without which the person is unable to live fully as a human being, to define, affirm, and assert himself, and to enter into satisfying relationships with other persons:

> One of Joyce Carol Oates' persistent concerns is to make the tragic vision real to the twentieth century.[2] states Mary Kathryn Grant.

Violence has had a long history in America. The long shadow cast by violence characterized the century. The great wars, tribal enmity and political assassinations, though not new to human history, have permeated the century beyond all comprehensions, detracting from the progress and affecting its final kaleidoscopic form. In the introduction to his 1970 collection of primary documents, American Violence: A Documentary History, two - time Pulitzer Prize - winning historian Richard Hofstadter writes:

> What is impressive to one who begins to learn about American violence is its extraordinary frequency, its sheer commonplaceness in our history, its persistence into very recent and contemporary times, and its rather abrupt contrast with our pretensions to singular national virtue.[3]

The result of social liberation in the country has led to an enormous release of pent-up energies as well as an upward movement of suppressed groups, a greater exercise of political rights, and unprecedented prosperity at all levels of the population, and a freer access to the

advantages of modernization. Simultaneously with these gains there has been an explosion of negative symptoms within the community. Aggressiveness and violence by the lower classes, a revolt of the exploited, sexual promiscuity and drug abuse by youth, the lessening of parental authority before individual maturity, the decline of the sanctity of marriage, militancy among the blacks and other minority groups along with the growing instances of crime, are a few of the more disturbing signs of trouble.[4] Each of these negative expressions has had a destructive or disturbing impact upon the society. Another important factor must also be taken into consideration in terms of the growing psychological tension and social stress. Climbing the social or economic ladder required an enormous individual effort. This has laid extreme stress upon the individual which is considerably even greater than the general stress of modern life. As such it has further contributed upon the stress-related symptoms of contemporary society and this has resulted in violence, suicide, alcohol, drug abuse, divorce and crime.

Although violence has always been part of the human landscape, America in particular has been undergoing a serious epidemic of adolescent violence which has deeply scarred families, schools and communities. According to Oates this aspect remains central to the symbol of eruptions in the personality itself. Lawrence Friedman in his study The History of Crime and Punishment in America writes:

> American violence must come from somewhere deep in the American personality…it cannot be accidental; nor can it be genetic. The specific facts of American life made it what it is… crime has been perhaps a part of the price of liberty…but American violence is still a historical puzzle.[5]

Hannah Arendt states:

> Violence, being instrumental by nature...it can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, it promotes

> neither History nor Revolution, but it can indeed serve to dramatize grievances and to bring them to public attention.[6]

She further states that:

> Violence is the weapon of choice for the impotent. Those who don't have much power often attempt to control or influence others by using violence. Violence rarely creates power. On the contrary, groups or individuals that use violence often find their actions diminish what little power they do have.[7]

The fact that violence often springs from rage is commonplace, and rage can indeed be irrational and pathological, but so can every other human affect. To resort to violence in view of outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of the immediacy and swiftness inherent in it. It goes against the grain of rage and violence to act with deliberate speed; but this does not make it irrational. On the contrary, in private as well as public life there are situations in which the very swiftness of a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy. As Hannah Arendt clarifies:

> The point is that under certain circumstances violence, which is to act without argument or speech and without reckoning with consequences, is the only possibility of setting the scales of justice right again.[8]

John Fraser notes in Violence in the Arts:

> Some violences make for intellectual clarity and a more civilized consciousness, while others makes for confusion.[9]

If Oates' fiction leads to a sense of confusion, this is so in order to reflect the confusion that is inherent in human life and to push on toward a new consciousness. In the world of her novels, people make love, play pianos, and eat violently. Music explodes, grins shatter and grease spatters maliciously as Oates uses every rhetorical device at her command to create an explosive atmosphere. By not relying solely on the narration of violent actions but

supplementing this with rhetorical violence, she succeeds in generating a highly charged fictional environment. Her narratives mirror the turbulence and disorder of this nightmarish world. By repeatedly describing even the most ordinary of human actions in terms of hostility, brutality, and truculence, Oates creates a totally violent fictive world.

Carl Jung has made an important contribution to reflection on the problem of violence, through the concept of the "shadow." He and his collaborator Erich Neumann explains the concept in the following way:

> The human psyche has two primary divisions: the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious mind consists of the ego and the persona. The ego is the individual's intellectual perception of reality and of the self, the "I" that forms the continuing sense of personal identity through time. The persona is the presentation of the self to the world as a "mask." It represents the way in which the individual plays certain roles and engages in various behaviors in order to fit in and be successful in his surroundings. [10]

As Charles K. Bellinger mentions in The Geneaology of Violence, the unconscious mind consists of two parts, the personal unconscious holds memories relating to the individual's life history and the personal dreams. The collective unconscious is the individual's point of connection with the human race as a whole and its history. The "shadow" consists of the negative traits, inadequacies and guilt feelings which the individual seeks to hide. In Neumann's words:

> The shadow is the other side. It is the expression of our own imperfection and earthliness, the negative which is incompatible with the absolute values; it is our inferior corporeality in contradistinction to the absoluteness and eternity of a soul which "does not belong to this world." But it can also appear in the opposite capacity as "spirit," for instance when the conscious mind only

> recognizes the material values of this life. The shadow represents the uniqueness and transitoriness of our nature; it is our own state of limitation and subjection to the conditions of space and time. [11]

From Neuman's observation it is apparent that if the shadow remains unacknowledged and unintergrated into the conscious personality, then it can become a very dangerous and destabilizing force, leading the individual into various kinds of distorted behavior that results from ego-inflation. Neuman further states that:

> Ego-inflation invariably implies a condition in which the ego is overwhelmed by a content which is greater, stronger and more highly charged with energy than consciousness, and which therefore causes a kind of state of possession in the conscious mind. What makes this state of possession so dangerous – irrespective of the nature of the content which lies behind it – is that it prevents the ego and the conscious mind from achieving a genuine orientation to reality.[12]

The Jungian understanding of the roots of violence builds on the idea of the "projection of the shadow." Since the shadow is that part of the personality which contains repressed feelings of inferiority and guilt, the ego attempts to reinforce its positive self-image by projecting the shadow onto other human beings. Oates' characters do not want to honestly face their own failings and inadequacies; as such they often see oppression and other negatives in others. They often live in a fog of illusions created by their own minds. In Jung's words:

> All hysterical people are compelled to torment others, because they are unwilling to hurt themselves by admitting their own inferiority. But since nobody can jump out of his skin and be rid of himself, they stand in their own way everywhere as their own evil spirit – and this is what we call a hysterical neurosis.[13]

Neumann expresses this idea in a particularly succinct way:

> The shadow which is in conflict with the acknowledged values, cannot be accepted as a negative part of one's own psyche and is therefore projected – that is, it is transferred to the outside world and experienced as an outside object. It is combated, punished, and exterminated as "the alien out there" instead of being dealt with as "one's own inner problem." [14]

The concept of the projection of the shadow strikes a chord as a fruitful approach to understanding violence in Oates' works. She repeatedly uses concentrations of violence in her works in order to direct her reader's attention away from the externals of American society to crucial underlying surges in the psyche. Much of the power of Oates' fiction lies in her disturbing ability to identify and expose the fears that recede deep within humanity. Through her art she touches upon these dark, personal fears that often refuse to be confronted. Her fiction often displays the kind of extreme intensity and outright horror of events and emotions that results in disturbing, vicious and often disgusting scenes of violence. Her characters, as Oates commented – be they rich or poor, uneducated or cultured – "live within a psychological pressure - cooker, responding to intense personal and societal conflicts which lead almost inevitably to violence." Oates' fiction has often focused particularly on the moment when a combined psychological and cultural malaise erupts into violence; and despite the notable variety of her character portrayals there are several representative "types" that recur frequently and present distinctive facts of the turbulent American experience.

The historical contours of Oates' life had a paradoxical quality of their own. The rural, economically straitened environment of her childhood, in the bleak heart of upstate New York Snow Belt, seemed an improbable setting for intellectual and artistic achievement. When she transferred to a high school in Lockport, she quickly distinguished herself. Being

an excellent student, she contributed to her high school newspaper and won a scholarship to attend Syracuse University, where she majored in English. When she was only 19, she won the "college short story" contest sponsored by *Mademoiselle* Magazine. It was a prize that Sylvia Plath had won a few years earlier. Soon her graduate seminar papers were being printed in prominent academic journals. Within a few years, she was winning O.Henry awards for her short stories on an annual basis and publishing books that made her, in the opinion of one critic, "the finest American novelist, man or woman, since Faulkner." By the early 1970's, Oates literary success suggested a feminist version of the archetypal pursuit and achievement of the American dream. Oates was also a valedictorian of her graduating class. After receiving her BA degree in 1960, she earned her Master degree at the University of Wisconsin in 1961. Throughout this decade of full time teaching she continued producing books at the rate of one or two per year, and these included some of her masterpieces - Wonderland (1971); Do With Me What You Will (1973); Childwold (1976) and Son of the Morning (1978). With her husband Raymond Smith, Oates has edited the Ontario Review and, from time to time, published books under its imprint. She has regularly contributed substantial essays and reviews to, among others, The New York Times Book Review, The New Republic, and The New York Review of Books.[15]

In the early 1980s, Oates surprised critics and readers with a series of novels, beginning with Bellefluer (1980), in which she reinvented the conventions of Gothic fiction, using them to reimagine whole stretches of American history. Just as suddenly, she returned, at the end of the decade, to her familiar realistic ground with a series of ambitious family chronicles, including You Must Remember This (1987), and Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart (1990). The novels namely Solstice (1985) and Marya: A Life (1986), also date from this period, and they use the materials within her family and childhood days to create moving studies of the female experience. In addition to her literary fiction, she has

written a series of experimental suspense novels under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith. Oates has written 58 novels, over 22 collections of short stories, ten volumes of poetry, plays, innumerable essays and book reviews, as well as longer nonfiction works on literary subjects ranging from the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the fiction of Dostoyevsky and James Joyce, to studies of the gothic and horror genres. She also wrote non-literary subjects as the painter George Bellows and the boxer Mike Tyson. In 1996, Oates received the PEN/ Malamud Award for "a lifetime of literary achievement," and, in 2010 she received National Medal of Arts and National Humanist Medal.

Her husband, Raymond Smith, died in 2008, shortly before the publication of her 32nd collection of short stories, *Dear Husband*. Oates continues to live and write in Princeton, New Jersey, where she is Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. Oates remains a major force in contemporary American writing. Aside from her fiction and her teaching, she is a prolific poet, essayist, playwright, critic and book reviewer. Several of her plays have been produced in New York and she is an extremely popular, engaging speaker on college campuses across the country.[16] For more than three decades, Oates has been hailed as one of the most significant and enduring writers of the twentieth century.[17] Yet, she has remained an enigmatic figure, who shuns publicity, and maintains an extremely low profile and many journalists consider her to be a recluse.[18] Oates has chosen to stay focused upon her writing, and thus, her rate of production has been staggering. Confronting an artist who attempts so much, some critics and scholars complain about her very profusion, finding her "too prolific".[19] When Oates was questioned upon how she felt on being labeled as "prolific writer" she answered:

> Well, I don't seem very prolific to myself. I write fairly slowly, I write a paragraph then I look at it and write it over again… And something people don't seem to believe is that I basically love writing.[20]

Some critics find it difficult to move beyond partial estimates or the most general, even grudging acknowledgement of her sheer energy. Yet, as her own comments suggest and as an overview of the phenomenon of Oates seems to confirm, her work is necessarily wide. Writing is an art, and art, as Oates comments often is itself built around potential violence, in as much as it is an affirmation of self-hood, growing from a desire to establish one's own boundaries and autonomy as well as a gesture of liberation.

Oates' versatility as a fiction writer relates directly to her overwhelming fascination with the phenomenon of contemporary America: its colliding social and economic forces, its philosophical contradiction and its wayward, often violent energies. Taken as a whole, Oates' fiction portrays America as a seething, vibrant "wonderland" in which individual lives are frequently subject to disorder, dislocation, and extreme psychological turmoil. Her protagonists range from inner-city dwellers and migrant workers to intellectuals and affluent suburbanites; but all her characters, regardless of background suffer intensely the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of American culture – a suffering that Oates conveys with both scrupulous accuracy and great compassion. Elizabeth Dalton in her article "Joyce Carol Oates: Violence in the Head" states that Oates' "particular genius is her ability to convey psychological states with unerring fidelity and to relate the intense private experiences of her characters to the larger realities of American life":

> I think I have a vulnerability to a vibrating field of other people's experiences,

She told an interviewer in 1972:

> I lived through the '60s in the United States, I was aware of hatreds and powerful feelings all around me.[21]

Her frequently remarked tendency to focus upon psychological terror and imbalance thus relates directly to her vision of America, what Alfred Kazin has called "her sweetly brutal sense of what American experience is really like."[22] Though she has been accused of using gratuitous or obsessive violence in her work, Oates has insisted that her violent materials accurately mirror the psychological and social convulsions of the present time. In an acerbic essay titled "Why is Your Writing So Violent?" she points out:

> Serious writers, as distinct from entertainers or propagandists, take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods… The serious writer, after all, bears witness. [23]

Reacting upon the question as to whether her writing is unduly violent she declares that to her mind, she's simply presenting the moral and social conditions of America. "Most of my novels and stories", she told an interviewer:

> Are explorations of the contemporary world interpreted in a realist mode, from what might be called a tragic and humanistic viewpoint. Tragedy always upholds the human spirit because it is an exploration of human nature in terms of its strengths. One simply cannot know strengths unless suffering, misfortune, and violence are explored quite frankly by the writer.[24]

Although violence is a dominant mode of contemporary fiction, many contemporary writers, especially the fabulators, objectify the violent and absurd aspects of their culture. John Hawkes' The Lime Twig (1961), for instance, competes with Oates' novels in the number and type of violent events it portrays, but it is a metaphorical violence, a projection of psychic images rather than of reality. Although these writers may not be conscious that they are subduing the beast of contemporary life by taking it out of real settings – indeed it is distinctly not the point for them – it is nevertheless an effect of their work. Oates, however, is

usually meticulous in drawing her realistic settings so that when a fabulous event invades ordinary circumstances, it is jarring and disturbing because it is made part of the ordinary flow of time; it is not isolated by the imagination from life. It is less an aesthetic image projected by the imagination than it is an imitation, albeit melodramatic, of life.[25] Oates' fiction does alarm and repels, but what Oates does describe is an oppressive and insistent rhythm of American life. In answer to a question about the violence in her fiction, she said:

> These things do not have to be contrived. This is America.[26]

Her works projects an America of race riots, migrant labor camps, suburban greed, motorcycle and race car jocks, mail-order rifles, volatile and hyperbolic adolescence, political assassination, family violence, self-proclaimed prophets preaching death and drugs – the America screaming from the headlines of the daily presses. Oates often sets this "headline" picture of American life against the larger canvas of American history. Her novels, which often begins in the nineteen thirties, denote a sense of the movement of American history. Behind the gripping close-up of her characters' lives move the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights Movements and the Vietnam War.

On analyzing the concept of violence, James Gilligan writes:

> Violence can be analyzed as a destruction of our physical and bodily existence, as well as of its symbolic representations in language and other institutions. Violence, however, can also be analyzed at a more fundamental level. Phenomenologically viewed, it is not only destructive of pre-given sense, but also affects our being – in – the - world, i.e., our basic capacities for making sense. [27]

Oates' characters are unique in contemporary American fiction in the frequency and severity of their destructive behavior. Oates has created, and continues prolifically to create a paranomic vision of America in which something has gone "terribly wrong." Unlike writers

in the great humanistic European and American traditions, Oates seems to seldom believe in human capacities for learning and for emotional growth and awareness as well as in the ego's connection to anything beyond its temporary sensory gratifications. Despite Oates' considerable national reputation as a writer, teacher and essayist, she has so far been consistently successful aesthetically in her representation of retrenched contemporary life on native grounds. Her insistence that society provides boundaries for existence and knowledge that cannot be crossed, clearly distinguishes her fiction from much classic and contemporary American fiction. According to Poirier:

> What distinguishes our fictional heroes is that there is nothing within the real world, or in the systems which dominate it, that can possibly satisfy their aspirations.[28]

They create "a world elsewhere," free from the mire of fact, where the individual trancends the temporal and cultural limits of his existence. The need for transcendence and the dissatisfaction with the American experience as a sustaining and meaningful base for life, has often been traced to the peculiarities of America's historical and political circumstances. As Tocqueville noted in Democracy in America, in a democracy:

> Each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: namely himself. If he ever looks higher, he percieves only the immense form of a society at large, or the still more imposing aspect of mankind...What lies between is a void.[29]

American fiction seems to acknowledge the truth of Tocqueville's observation. For the most part, American classic and contemporary writers have concentrated on the romance, with excursions into realism and naturalism, (which the naturalist Frank Norris argued in "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" is also romance.[30]) Much of the contemporary romance fiction is perhaps less a manifestation of twentieth-century experimentation than a symptom of

America's history and political system. American writers seem to felt that there are no institutions which adequately mediate between the individual and the universe at large, the individual feels himself 'dangling" between his puny life and the immensity of creation. The recourse has been to create "a world elsewhere." This tendency on the part of American fiction to ignore or subdue with fabulations the American experience has been encouraged by the facts of twentieth-century life, namely, the holocaust; nuclear weapons; increased mobility; the faded power of family life, religion, ideology; and the "orgiastic" technological society.[31] However, Oates suggests that if these are the terms of existence, then the escape into the "fabulous," into the isolation of personal fantasies and fears, is only an intensification of these terms and not a true liberation from them.[32] In a critical essay on Troilus and Cressida, Oates reveals her concern with the limits that are imposed by life in the world:

> Man is trapped within a temporal, physical world, and his rhetoric, his poetry, even his genius cannot free him. What is so modern about the play is its existential insistence upon the complete inability to transcend his fate.

Later in the same essay she states:

> There is a straining upward, an attempt on the part of the characters to truly transcend their predicaments. The predicaments, however, cannot be transcended because man is locked in the historical and the immediate.[33]

Oates' life seems to bear a paradoxical relationship to her writing. She pursued a quiet, disciplined daily routine, yet wrote about people who were floundering in personal chaos and social order. In a 1989 letter, Oates related her own sense of invisibility to her gender:

> The social self, the person people encounter, is almost irrelevant. I think this must be particularly true for women writers, though not necessarily for the traditional reasons – the masking of the writerly self by, say, Jane Austen,

> Edith Wharton, Emily Dickinson, in the service of maintaining an acceptable feminine image in others' eyes.[34]

Greg Johnson mentioned that even Oates' close friends were puzzled by the mysterious intensity of her engagement with her work. And the most interesting question became not "How does she do it?" but "Why does she do it?" Her devotion to work could be explained by her family circumstances: the depression-era background and toilsome lives of her parents combined with a crucial work ethic dating back to American Puritanism. On the psychological factor, literature became an escape from the threatening world of her childhood and from the turbulent social reality of America, the means of creating an imaginative "counter world" that reflected a violent society but kept the writer safely cocooned inside the aesthetic constructs over which she exerted a godlike control. Greg Johnson deduces:

> Or one could accept the answer Oates herself often gave: she loved her work, and in fact didn't consider it "work" at all quiet simply, she lived for her writing; it was her "life's commitment.[35]

Oates' mother's family had emigrated from Budapest at the turn of the century. Memories of her grandparents' peasant origins and temperaments, which might "sound flamboyant and colorful," she noted wryly in her journal, [36] "if seen through the retrospective of years and the prudent filter of language,"[37] suggested a possibly discomforting encounter with her own heritage. Some of these recollections, previously denied or repressed, have struck her with the force of revelation. As a young writer, she had refused to discuss her background with journalists while claiming that the material was too personal. Oates' immigrant heritage, the hardscrabble early lives of her parents during the Depression, and her own childhood in the upstate New York countryside seemed to her, as a part of a world that was best left "back there." It was a rich fund of memories and material for her writing, but

related only in a private, oblique way to the intellectually oriented young writer that she had become.

As she grew older, however, Oates' expressions of nostalgia for her family heritage appeared often in her private journal,[38] and by the 1990s her parents and her own recollections became the focus of several autobiographical essays. These "confessional" pieces included details about her childhood and family that, twenty years earlier, she would not have share with her closest friends, much less have committed to print. She had become particularly obsessed with the early lives of her parents, in part because, as she writes:

> We carry our young parents within us, so much more vivid and alive, pulsing-alive, than any memory of ourselves as infants, children.[39]

Oates had also become fascinated by her grandparents' experiences, which were marked by the same dark turnings of fate that regularly befall the characters in Oates' fiction. Her maternal grandparents, she learned, had been forced to give her mother, Carolina up for adoption because the family had grown too large. Her paternal grandmother, to whom Oates was extremely close as a child, had been abandoned by her husband when Oates' father, Frederic was only a toddler. There were other surprising details: Oates paternal great-grandfather was a German Jew who had changed his name from "Morgenstern" to "Morningstar" in the 1980s. Years later, in a fit of jealous rage, he beat his wife severely with a hammer and then shot himself. Oates' maternal grandfather, Stephen Bush, also met a violent end: he was murdered in a tavern brawl. Although Fred and Carolina Oates provided a safe and nurturing home environment for their children, Oates' early years had held their own terrors, including an instance of "semi-molestation" and constant bullying that prompted her, years later, to describe her childhood as "a day scrambled for existence."[40] In 1995, she observes:

> How ironic, as a writer I've been constantly queried why do you write about violent acts? What do you know of violence? And my replies are polite, thoughtful, abstract and even idealistic. I might say that my entire life, indeed the lives of both my parents, have been shaped by 'violent acts.'[41]

It was perhaps inevitable that a novelist obsessively concerned with the mysteries of personality and identity should finally long to piece together what could be recovered of her past, with its eerily blended elements of terror and beauty. For many of Oates earliest impressions were imbued with a magical sense of wonder that inspired an intense nostalgia: "What romance, in that world," she wrote in a letter to Carolina. "because you inhabited it, you and Daddy, it's transformed."[42] To focus exclusively on the unsavory and violent details of her background, she observed, would be no less misleading than to deny them. Oates often felt willingly:

> Pulled back into that world as into the most seductive and most nourishing of dreams. I'm filled with a sense of wonder, and awe, and fear, regret for all that has passed, and for what must be surrendered, what we can imagine as life but cannot ever explain.[43]

To Oates, her family background continued to represent a tantalizing mystery:

> Like a door opening to a shadowy passageway, but only just opening a few inches, never to be budged any further.[44]

Oates has often said that a primary motive behind her writing is her yearning to memorialize the past, especially the lives of her mother and father. The rural world of her mother's childhood and the youthful aspirations of both her parents inspired in their daughter a romantic longing to cast the turbulent flux of a lost era into the enduring shapeliness of art. In A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) and in other early novels such as them (1969) and Wonderland (1971), Oates reached back to the 1930s as the dramatic focus of her narratives

she evoked the world of the Depression and its aftermath as a landscape that was marked by the passionate energies and sharp deprivations out of which her young protagonists tried to forge their own identities and control their own fates. In contrast to the heroines of her later, work, Oates cast young males in these novels as her autobiographical counterparts, or soul mates. Out of her own early sense of self she created sensitive, highly intelligent idealists who experience a variety of fates: suffering defeat by the materialistic forces of mid-century American culture, like Swan Revere in A Garden of Earthly Delights who pursues the American dream through love and violence and Jules Wendall in them; or forging a self through the sheer force of will, like Wonderland's Jesse Vogel, a Depression-era orphan who becomes a celebrated neurosurgeon. At the heart of these early protagonists' experiences, however, is their author's insistent homage to the bedrock of natural and social reality from which they arose. In an early interview, Oates remarked that behind all her fiction lay an "imperishable sense of reality" derived primarily from the natural settings and economically straitened circumstances of her family background – a reality she has transcribed faithfully and sometimes obsessively in her fiction. "The real clue to me," she added, "is that I'm like certain people who are not really understood – Jung and Heidegger are good examples – people of peasant stock, from the country, who then come into a world of literature or philosophy. Part of us is very intellectual, wanting to read all the books in the library – or even wanting to write all the books in the library. Then there's the other side of us, which is sheer silence, inarticulate – the silence of nature, of the sky, of pure being."[45]

Brian P.Hayes comments:

> Miss Oates tells what happens to her characters and what their experiences – usually terrible- do to them but she rarely explains what they are thinking about their plights…A number of the major themes of literature are recognizable in Miss Oates' works. She has Tolstoy's sense of history as it

> overwhelms the individual, and she reveals a classical affinity for fatalism and lost innocence... Miss Oates' ties are to the twentieth-century school of American naturalism, particularly Theodore Dreiser. Although she is less concerned with sociology than he was, Miss Oates' stories unfold in the same harsh settings, and her characters fight to survive with the same befuddled amorality as those of An American Tragedy [46]

Through Oates identification with her highly intelligent young heroes in the early novels, she placed them in a family context that included such earthly characters such as Clara, Swan's mother in A Garden of Earthly Delights, and Loretta, Jules's mother in them . When them was published Oates told an interviewer:

> I have a great admiration for those females who I know from my own life, my background, my family – very strong female figures who do not have much imagination in an intellectual sense, but they're very capable of dealing with life.[47]

A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) is set in rural Eden County and chronicles the life of the daughter of a migrant worker who marries a wealthy farmer in order to provide for her illegitimate son. The woman's idyllic existence is destroyed, however, when the boy murders his stepfather and kills himself. In Expensive People (1967), the second work in the series, images of destitution, strain, hatred as well as ordinary incidents are depicted dramatically and violent scenes constantly heightened. "I was a child murderer" is the opening sentence of the novel. Oates also exposes the superficial world of suburbanites whose preoccupation with material comforts reveals their spiritual poverty. The final volume in the trilogy, them (1969), opens with the scene of a concentration of pointless, uneasy malice and murder. The novel denotes elements of blood soaking in a pillow, the odor of blood and bodies, crazed fear, rape, and through it all, the relentless determinism of poverty.

The story depicts the violence and degradation that is endured by three generations of an urban Detroit family. Critics acknowledge that Oates' experiences as a teacher in Detroit during the early 1960's contributed to her accurate rendering of the city and its social problems. She has described A Garden of Earthly Delights, Expensive People, and them as a consciously wrought "trilogy", intended to examine the representative facts of American life: the rural, suburban, and inner – city environments respectively, each containing its own forms of moral and psychological decay.[48] These stories all have in common, both a riveting psychological intensity and an authoritative, all – inclusive vision of "what American experience is really like" for people who suffer various kinds of emotional turmoil and who become emblematic of America as a whole.[49] The Falls (2004), is a book which was acclaimed by *Washington Post* as "One of the best books of the year." It is another exploration of violence where one woman's honeymoon is salvaged by her husband's suicide. The widow is remarried to a wealthy and handsome lawyer but her love shifts to something darker as she becomes obsessed with the idea of losing her second husband, and when her children come along, her love for them is so fierce and so charged that it remains absolutely terrifying. In Black Girl/White Girl (2006), Genna the main protagonist, has been haunted for fifteen years by the brutal death of her enigmatic college roommate – a merit scholarship student named Minette Swift, (the title's black girl) – Genna embarks on what she calls a "test without a title in the service of justice", a personal "inquiry" in which she attempts to reconstruct the events of the fateful year when she and Minette were freshmen. The novels showcase her fascination with violence as well as her almost vampiric ability to tap into the subconscious of her troubled characters and her taste for appropriating real – life tragedy. In her work The Edge of Impossibility (1972), she revealed:

> Violence is always an affirmation – to understand it, that is, and not be repelled by it. For violence is an affirmation only when it is perceived as a last remedy against nihilism, a desperate grace.

Oates's criticism makes clear that this is how she conceives of violence and its role in art.

In a much - quoted remark, Philip Roth has said that "the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to describe, and then to make credible, much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents."[50] Yet Joyce Carol Oates has met this challenge with increasingly bold and resourceful experiments in fiction. A sense of place is important to most novelists, but in Oates' work the setting is profoundly linked to each major character's sense of self. Her fiction is often a means of recovering the worlds which she has lost, especially in terms of the rural setting of her childhood and the city of Lockport. As an adult, she would devote many passages in her journal to recording in precise detail the rooms, houses, neighborhoods, and natural landscapes in which crucial events of her life had transpired.[51] In 1985, after a five-day visit with her parents, Oates wrote in one entry that she felt "caught in that odd hypnotic trance of (what can I call it? The spell – surely inexplicable to anyone else – of Lockport, New York) the past not quiet remembered."[52] During the second night of her visit home, she wrote:

> I drove by myself around the city. At dusk. Very slowly. Those streets: Grand St., Transit St.,…Hawley St. school where, 60 years ago, my father was a student…Lost emotions. Lost feeling. That elusive lost self. Three times I drove along Grand St., past the house my grandmother had rented…Yet to think of approaching it as it was in, say, 1953, or earlier, is to feel a clutch of emotion almost too powerful to contain. And to ascend those stairs! And to

> enter that small living room! The kitchen! My grandmother's bedroom and sewing room![53]

Characteristically, Oates made pragmatic use of this burst of nostalgia in her novel You Must Remember This (1987) , published two years later. Thanking John Updike for his review of the novel in The New Yorker, Oates wrote that she was especially pleased that Updike had quoted a passage featuring a footbridge:

> The very image that was the first thing I had written, in a sort of white heat, imagining the novel as a recasting of my early adolescence spent in Lockport…My grandmother with whom I was extremely close lived on a street very like the Stevicks' in a house very like theirs." The footbridge, she recalled, was "high above the Erie canal and precariously close, as it seemed to me, to a railroad bridge.[54]

This aspect was so haunting to the young Oates that she often dreamed about it and the Lockport footbridge subsequently made numerous appearances in her fiction.

Apart from her own experiences, Oates' observations of her friends' marriages also contributed to her fiction about romantic love, particularly where the identity of the female character was concerned. One of her friends, Patty Brunett remembered that Oates was:

> Very very curious about my life and what I was doing, and how I felt about men, and the women's movement. [55]

In 1969, Patty painted Oates' portrait and remembered that as Oates sat there, perfectly, motionless, she remembered that:

> Women should be utterly independent in their marriage, and lead their own lives, and not be the pawn of husbands.[56]

An academic couple that Oates befriended in the late 1960s, John and Ruth Reed also recalled Oates' strong opinions about women's independence and the importance of a healthy marriage.

Oates increasingly hectic life had began to take a considerable physical toll. After a trip to New York that she made in the late 1969, she denoted that she was extremely busy and worried and that despite attending dinner parties and eating in New York restaurants, she was unable to gain any weight. For Oates, periods of stress had begun causing a near-total loss of appetite. In her letters, Oates sometimes expressed revulsion toward food and parties generally, describing an event at the Detroit Golf Club where she had witnessed heaping displays of food that she found disgusting.[57] She mentions:

> Such displays are so ostentatious, they could not be parodied. [58]

Negative images of food recur with a peculiar frequency and intensity throughout her work. Her female protagonists in every decade of her career – Karen Herz in With Shuddering Fall (1964), Elena Howe in Do With Me What You Will (1971), Marya Knauer in Marya: A Life (1986), and Marianne Mulvaney in We Were the Mulvaneys (1996) – disdain the process of eating and nurture. In them, a girlfriend of Jules remarks that "I hate food. It's disgusting, when you consider it. And the need for food, having bodies and being reduced to eating food – did you ever think about that?"[59]

This drive towards anorexia is often coupled with a portrayal of female sexual experience in wholly negative and destructive terms. Especially considering the huge body of Oates' work, it is striking that the vast majority of her women experience sex as degrading and horrific. Rarely do lovers in Oates' fiction experience genuine tenderness and communion in the sexual act. Karen Herz, Clara Walpole, Maureen Wendall, Marya Knauer, Enid Stevick, Marianne Mulvaney, and Ingrid Boone[60] are only a few examples of the dozens of Oates' heroines who suffer sexual molestation, incest, or rape while permanently altering

their sense of self and their ability to form fulfilling sexual relationships. Although Oates herself sometimes dismissed her personal issues with food, claiming that she simply preferred working to eating, it seems clear that the frequent and occasionally intense anorexic impulses that mark her life and are often dramatized in her fiction have deep psychological roots. Both medical and feminist authorities on anorexia have defined a number of causative factors, many of which correspond to the facts of Oates' early life and her psychological makeup. According to one expert, an experience of sexual abuse such as that which Oates suffered as a young girl often leads to the development of eating disorder. For a girl who has felt victimized, fasting "begins to yield a particularly powerful sense of control…it provides a sense of mastery."[61]

Oates says that her artistic mission was to dramatize the painful conflicts of her era; "There's no need to write about happy people, happy problems; there's only the moral need to instruct readers," she says, "concerning the direction to take, in order to achieve happiness (or whatever: maybe they don't want happiness, only confusion)." In a brief essay published in *The American Scholar*, she noted that many American writers were dreamily lost in a self-obsessed view of art that was "passive and deathly"; only Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow, she said, had "struggles quiet nobly to define a self in the center of chaos." She added that her brief year in England (1971-1972) had allowed her "to think dispassionately about what is happening back home, about the kind of writing that is being turned out and applauded, and about my own career up to this point. I can see in amazement that I have only haphazardly and instinctively, never consciously, broken through that dreaminess myself, and that the whole range of my writing so far has dealt only with one phase of the personality and its possibilities."[62]

Harold Bloom states:

> What I myself find most moving in Oates is her immense empathy with the insulted and injured her deep identification with the American lower classes. She is not a political novelist, not a social revolutionary in any merely overt way, and yet she is our true proletarian novelist.[63]

Towards 1980s, Oates shift away from the stark sometimes violent contemporary realism of her work into the lush, romantic playfulness of Gothic conventions. However, it hardly signaled any relaxation into an easier, more "feminine" mode of writing. And in 1985, she excitedly returned to the realistic mode which represented a major artistic turning point, which is reflected in most of her fiction of the late 1980s and beyond. But the transition encompassed more than a simple reversion to her favored mode of psychological realism. Her Detroit fiction of the late 1960s and 1970s – them (1969), Wonderland (1971), Do With Me What You Will (1973) and The Assassins: A Book of Hours (1975) had focused on the social ills of contemporary America in the city Oates considered a microcosm of the nation as whole, and her Gothic quintet of the early 1980s – Bellefleur (1980), A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Mysteries of Winterthurn (1984) had experimented with the aesthetic modes and American myths of the nineteenth century. In sharp contrast to these phases of her career, her work now became more directly autobiographical while returning again and again to the upstate New York world of her childhood. This impulse would persist into the late 1990s. With a few exceptions, her subsequent novels were set in mythologized versions of the countryside that she had known as a child and of the cities- especially Lockport and Buffalo – that had dominated her adolescent experience. Marya: A Life (1986), You Must Remember This (1987), Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart (1990), Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang (1993), and Man Crazy (1997) all feature female protagonists whose temperaments and ways of responding to a bewildering, often hostile environment mirrors Oates' own. Marya Knauer, Enid Stevick, Iris Courtney, Maddy Wirtz, and Ingrid

Boone are highly intelligent, articulate girls who survive and bear witness to painful and even brutal early experiences. Like Oates, they often find salvation in literary or academic achievement, seeing language as the means of ordering and, to some extent, transcending the past. Marya becomes a scholar, Iris marries into an academic family, Maddy records the achievements of the Foxfire gang, and only after Ingrid attends college does she cope with her horrific victimization and achieve a significant distance, both chronological and intellectual, from her nightmarish early life.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Oates secure position as a "woman of letters" combined with the increased self-knowledge of middle age has continued to enable a more intensely confessional impulse in her work. Intellectual and emotional distance from her own early trauma have given her the freedom to dramatize them more openly in her fiction and even to discuss them in interviews (with a frankness that would have been unthinkable to Oates in her twenties or thirties). It also seems likely that Oates' increasingly fragmented life during the 1980s and 1990s – stemming from her heightened visibility as a public figure and so different from her years of relative isolation has intensified her focus upon the distant past as a kind of emotional anchor, the essential core of her personal identity. In Wonderland, the brief portrait of Oates as a small child with her parents had been a mere cameo and it was a rare autobiographical indulgence. We Were the Mulvaneys and other novels of the past decade are filled with countless and specific details from Oates' personal experience. The very phrasing of her titles – "you must remember this," "what I lived for," "we were the mulvaneys" – suggests this backward-looking focus, as does the narrative technique in Foxfire and Man Crazy, both of which are deliberately constructed as "confessions." Whereas them and other early novels were "Balzacian," as Oates herself pointed out.[64] In their ambition as social chronicles, her most recent work namely, Blonde (2000), Middle Age; A Romance (2001)

and Black Girl/ White Girl (2006), to name a few are more "Oatesian" in the relentless focus upon language as a means of revisiting and memorializing the past.

In retrospect, it is possible to describe several distinct phases in her career and to suggest her significance within twentieth-century American literary culture. Her earliest work clearly arose from personal feelings of alienation: the novels and stories dealing with Eden County dramatized forcefully the rural world near Millersport, Lockport, and Buffalo, which Oates escaped (physically, if not emotionally) through her academic and literary achievements. The next major phase, spanning the years 1968 to 1972 was shaped largely by her Detroit experience, which encouraged her development from a somewhat derivatives. Many critics and anthologists still consider the major works of this period – the novel them (1969) and Wonderland (1971), to be the novel by Joyce Carol Oates that is most likely to endure. Although she has not produced another novel with the hypnotic power of them or the sustained intensity of Wonderland, the remainder of the 1970s saw her expanding her Balzacian exploration of American culture into the arenas of the law, politics, religion, and academic life.

The next major phase of Oates' career can be considered only a partial success. Residing comfortably in Princeton since 1978, Oates has lacked any significant conflict with her own environment, a situation that permitted the playful experimentation and, the self-indulgent excess of postmodernist Gothic quintet novels that began with Bellefleur (1980). Whereas Bellefleur represented a bold reinvention of literary reinvention of literary Gothicism, the succeeding volumes with their unsympathetic, long-winded narrators tempted Oates into writing books which, with their richness of allusion and artifice, were relished by academic specialists but not by the more general readership that for years had looked to Oates for unflinching, fully engaged portrayals of the contemporary American reality.[65] Throughout her life, Oates has made comments that are notable for expressing an uncertain sense of her

physical self while leading her to repeatedly use the metaphor of her own "invisibility." Many of Oates' self-descriptions suggest a willfully abstracted woman who, like a grown-up version of her childhood alter-ego, Lewis Carroll's Alice, has all but vanished into the wonderland of her imagination.[66] She told one interviewer, "there's this kind of empty blur that must be where I exist" she told another that she saw herself as a "mere vapor of consciousness." She added, "I don't really identify with my physical self that much."

The dramatic trajectory of Oates' career, especially her amazing rise from an economically straitened childhood to her current position as one of the world's most eminent authors, suggests a literary version of the mythic pursuit and achievement of the American dream. Yet for all her success and fame, Oates' daily routine of teaching and writing has changed very little, and her commitment to literature as a transcendent human activity remains steadfast. Not surprisingly, a quotation from a prolific American writer, Henry James, is affixed to the bulletin board over her desk, and perhaps best expresses her own ultimate view of her life and writing:

> We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.[67]

Oates fiction can be categorized into genres which are romantic, historical, gothic, crime and including family chronicles and the suspense novel. She shows a remarkable talent for parody and allows these various forms to meld into each other while following the rules of genre and reinventing its form simultaneously. The themes she follows in exploring her ideologies are involved in unpacking American images as a way of understanding the politics and complex psychological impact behind them. The images that Oates always labors to unpack are the starting points that lead the reader through her interpretations into an understanding of history as a labyrinth of competing ideologies and ceaselessly transforming conclusions. These ideologies are always based in significant American experiences that

usually end with violent consequences and have been simplified in history's record of them. The true meanings behind these experiences are unknown and the misconceptions that arise from their misunderstanding are destructive. Hence, there exists a continuing theme of the mystery and crime, whose solution never fits very comfortably in the character or reader's mind. Sometimes these 'mysteries' are very abstract and are connected to ideological systems which cannot be simply summarized, and sometimes they are frighteningly serious. These apply especially to her numerous stories of rape and other violence, and inherently against women and children. The answers to the cause of the violent experiences can be simply summed up, but the layers of ideological arguments that they are packed with, remain staunchly irresolvable.

Oates' usual method for portraying ideological framework is to write of dramatic events that are inherently violent in her stories. This is sometimes done with hindsight in which the character's deliberation is overshadowed by the interpretations which the characters place upon them. Within these interpretations the characters reveal their primary ideological drives and the positive and negative aspects of them. At times when an event is portrayed in the present, it is built around a jumble of conflicting emotions that make it unintelligible. The conception that the repercussions of crime are not always physically evident is an important idea to be considered in Oates' other more 'realistic' fiction where the crimes referred to are at times against people who are unscathed upon the surface, but display a considerable amount of mental and spiritual damage in the narrative. Though this crime is presented in the present time, its roots lie in previous crimes that are unmentionable because of the structure of the community's ideological basis and the suppression that can arise out of the tightly knit domesticity of the family suppression that can arise out of the tightly knit domesticity of the family. The same sense of 'crime' that is passively accepted or overlooked because of its domestic condition is broadened in Oates' family saga Bellefleur. Here,

family's gossip, stories and jokes initiate the transformation into a non-human and fantastic sense of reality. The lives of the family members that are interpreted by each other are changed through the imagination of the individual narrating it:

> For Bellefleurs, despite their affection for Hepatica, could not resist jests of a course nature; and such jests as the men readily admitted required a certain distortion of human reality.[68]

The distortion tries to imaginatively recreate situations with an edge drawn by personal motives illuminating the conflicting ideological bases by which the various members of the family over multiple generations live. Each of the family members have their own way of interpreting the 'American dream' and in the execution of these interpretations they find conflicts between the other members of the family. Creighton summarizes the two primary motives of the American dream that Oates represents:

> At the heart of the American dream is the quest for both material and spiritual fulfillment-two goals that are not always complementary. Bellefleurs epitomize and dramatize the dualities at the heart of the American dream and the American character.[69]

By inhabiting these ideological goals of the 'American dream' the family members dramatically represent the causes by which they are never satisfactorily fulfilled. These ideological elements of the 'American dream' are transposed into gothic renderings of events between the characters. The monstrous specters that work their way into the Bellefleur's reality are the psychologically real elements of character's conflicts.

The novels which Oates writes are an attempt to draw these American experiences from a different perspective in order to consider the competing ideologies that lie behind them. Through her artistic creations, readers are meant to infer that these events must be reimagined in order to be understood from a personal perspective. Oates' symbolic

representation of American ideology extends into the lengthy detailed descriptions she creates in her stories. These details of the character's lives and surroundings reflect the way they wish to physical create themselves. They represent the things by which the characters chose to build their own conception of reality. G F Waller considers the significance of the detail:

> Oates's America is built up as a reverberating symbolic structure from such material commonplaces as highways, automobiles, supermarkets, shopping malls, money, cleanliness, success, marriage, motherhood, all heightened into the fabric of gothic parable. Our experience is constantly revealed as characterized by tragic gaps between word and act, ideal and reality not in the trivial everyday sense but almost as a metaphysical principle, felt all the more strongly just because we are seekers of meaning, not merely of contentment.[70]

These details of existence with which the characters have surrounded themselves are choices that have been made in order to characterize their image of themselves. They are symbolic of aspects in their drive toward an ideal conception of the self. The physical reality which they build around themselves also invokes the ideological bases of past lives while transmuting them to the characters and their present lives. Oates identifies the determination to create a personal sense of the self as a distinctly American one, the country having been founded upon such ideas of independent conception. Her characters frequently dramatize this stubborn will for self creation as the character of Ardis in Do With Me What You Will (1973):

> We're our own ideas, we make ourselves up; some women let men make them up, invent them, fall in love with them, they're helpless to invent themselves … but not me, I'm nobody's idea but my own. I know who I am. [71]

Ardis' determination to be self-created leads her (as the novel progresses) to change her name several times. She also sits down at one point to trace the names her mother has gone through by trying to track down who she actually is. Oates represents through these characters the struggle they feel necessary to create themselves apart from any foreign, especially male, conceptions of who they are. As Waller states:

> For most contemporary fictionalists, Americans remain stubbornly caught up in dreams of identity and place; for Oates, ours remains a generation which still seeks 'the absolute dream', and as with the Puritans forsaking their history to journey to a wilderness, our dream must survive within an environment so aggressively materialistic that to assert the primacy of the unquantifiable seems necessary to end in the Manicheism which has constantly characterized American experience.[72]

The personal past that the characters work so hard to defeat is connected to a larger past that they feel must be disowned because it does not constitute the original images they carry of themselves. However, the material reality they build themselves into is based upon the ideologies of this past from which they wish to be released. Violence is a condition of society. It is also composed of individual acts and it is these that Oates records in her work. Yet, the fact that violence will remain a part of a larger social network is something that is referred to throughout Oates' reimagination of these violent events. As Creighton observes in connection with Oates' fiction:

> We strike out in order that we may become. In a society where the instincts are so much repressed, violence may become a gesture of liberation, of purging, or self-discovery. Indeed, violence seems to be at the heart of the dream of America, as we cultivate the palpable risk, the danger of our deepest desires.[73]

Understanding the violent and frequently ironic terms of the American experience, Oates has employed a notable variety of aesthetic approaches in her attempt to convey such an immense, kaleidoscopic and frequently grotesque reality. Driving the dynamo of her America is the fact of violence. The city and its automobiles and freeways, its material and psychic energies, are manifestations of the assertiveness and violence of America. Oates has asked herself:

> Am I personally haunted by the fear of violence, the need of violence, or do I reflect everyone else's feelings about it? I sensed it around me, both the fear and the desire, and perhaps I simply have appropriated it from other people? [74]

"But the violence that always threatens to erupt through the surface of Oates' America exists only in part as an acknowledgement of the omnipresence of the struggle, crime, and chaos in our society," writes G.F. Waller. She repeatedly uses concentrations of violence in her fiction to direct the readers' attention away from the externals of American society in order to crucial underlying surges in the psyche. Oates devises the rhetoric of violence in order to sensitise the reader towards the highly volatile, nightmarish undercurrents in the psyche, thereby making the reader aware of imminent dislocation or disaster in lives.

The violence which is omnipresent in Oates' fiction, is more a reflection of the general atmosphere that she feels in society than any cry of victimization. The question of violence in Oates writing is well condensed in Elaine Showalter's 'Portrait' of Oates:

> In the seventies, Oates' work was often criticized for its violent themes and images, for scenes of riots, beatings, and murders; and reviewers wondered whether some trauma of her own was responsible for her dark vision. Oates responded in a 1981 essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, called 'Why Is Your Writing So Violent?' The question, she wrote, was 'always

> insulting…always ignorant…always sexist,' a question that would never be asked of a serious male artist.[75]

The work of Joyce Carol Oates uses ideological frameworks like the 'American dream' to artistically unravel the definitions by which it has been constructed and the consequences of attempts to actualize it. The personal interactions between the characters in her stories are the meeting points of different interpretations of ideologies. The reader can interpret from this the multifarious influences that filter into ideological constructions. Oates' prodigious ability to realize these interactions through various fictional modes of writing produces a range of perspectives to the central ideologies that she seeks to unpack. The awareness of mode that this produces is distinctly postmodernist in its awareness of the limitations in its construction. Oates seeks through her works, to awaken contemporary society to its own destruction and to deepen the consciousness of her readers to the tragic dimensions of life. Positing the hopeful idea that the violent conflicts in American culture represent, not an "apocalyptic close" but a "transformation of being", Oates suggests that we are experiencing " a simple evolution into a higher humanism, perhaps a kind of intelligent pantheism, in which all substance in the universe (including the substance fortunate enough to perceive it) is there by equal right." [76]

Violence therefore must be faced as an omnipresent in the society. This observation is thrust not just as an obvious commonplace but as an urgent insight that the most revered rituals, games and relationships are necessarily interpenetrated by violence. Rather than trying to maintain standards of civilization in the face of violence, Oates' characters are forced to reaffirm or reassess their values as they encounter violence at the heart of all their most intimate and valuable experiences. In the bewildering profusion and violence of modern times, in the lives of her students and in her own fiction, she finds her subject.

Alfred Kazin has written that Oates, more than most women writers in America, seems:

> Entirely open to social turmoil, to the frighteningly undirected and misapplied force of the American powerhouse.[77]

Critics hold diverse opinions about Oates' work, particularly about her repeated use of graphic violence. Eva Manske has summarised the general view:

> Some of her novels and stories are rather shrill in depicting the human situation, remain melodramatic renderings of everyday life, highly charged with unrelenting scenes of shocking, random violence, or madness and emotional distress that Oates chronicles as dominant elements of experience in the lives of her characters. [78]

To this charge Oates responded:

> When people say there is too much violence in my books, what they are saying is there is too much reality in life.[79]

Oates is obsessed not merely by the social profusion of America. Her fiction evokes the city (of America) as a revelation of psychological besides social realism. The sense of victimization, the rootless bewilderment and paucity of relationships are all rooted in the psyche and they emerge in it involuntary, movements or cryptic, frustrated ejaculations of command or insult. In Kierkegaard's theory of violence:

> Violence arises out of human resistance to the possibility of psychological change and growth into maturity. [80]

In the same manner, for Oates, this resistance to change becomes the cause of violence which torments her characters. Her work exude a sense of a writer extraordinarily involved in, and open to the variety of American lives and determined not just to record or reflect upon but to embrace the polyphony of her times.

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This chapter will attempt to focus upon the significance of violence in Oates' novels. It shall examine aspects that are specifically related to the various nuances of violence and its thematic centrality in A Garden of Earthly Delights (1966), Expensive People (1968), them (1969), The Falls (2004) and Black Girl/White Girl (2006). Much of the power of Joyce Carol Oates' fictions lies in her disturbing ability to identify and expose the fears that everyone has deep within. Through her art she touches these dark, personal fears. "One of Joyce Carol Oates' persistent concerns is to make the tragic vision real to the twentieth century" states Mary Kathryn Grant.[1] Oates' fiction often displays the kind of extreme intensity and outright horror of events and emotions that results in disturbing, vicious and often disgusting scenes of violence. Her characters, as Oates commented – be they rich or poor, uneducated or cultured – "live within a psychological pressure- cooker, responding to intense personal and societal conflicts which lead almost inevitably to violence." Oates' fiction has often focused particularly on the moment when a combined psychological and cultural malaise erupts into violence; and despite the notable variety of her character portrayals there are several representative "types" that recur frequently and present distinctive facts of the turbulent American experience.

Understanding the violent and frequently ironic terms of the American experience, Oates has employed a notable variety of aesthetic approaches in her attempt to convey such an immense, kaleidoscopic and frequently grotesque reality. Driving the dynamo of her America is the fact of violence. The city and its automobiles and freeways, its material and psychic energies, are manifestations of the assertiveness and violence of America, so much so that, Oates has asked herself:

> Am I personally haunted by the fear of violence, the need of violence, or do I reflect everyone else's feelings about it? I sensed it around me, both the fear and the desire, and perhaps I simply have appropriated it from other people?[2]

G.F. Waller denotes:

> But the violence that always threatens to erupt through the surface of Oates' America exists only in part as an acknowledgement of the omnipresence of the struggle, crime, and chaos in our society.

Oates devises the rhetoric of violence in order to sensitize the reader towards the highly volatile, nightmarish undercurrents in the psyche, thereby making the reader aware of imminent dislocation or disaster in lives. Oates attempts to dramatize psychological intensity, and often conveys psychological states at the very border of sanity in her fictions. Her work combines extreme personal isolation, violent physical and psychological conflict, settings and symbolic action in order to convey painfully heightened psychological states, and a prose style of passion, which is often recurrent with melodramatic intensity. Oates' fiction expresses what is at once a gloomier and yet a more exalted view of the human personality. Oates views the human personality as involved rather than in a search for significance, and such a process may equally well emerge through pain, anguish, neurosis, and self-alienation as through need-satisfaction. Destructiveness, violence, and alienation cannot, in a Maslovian view, be regarded as creative or healthy; they are expression of the frustration of basic needs.[3] Once these needs are satisfied, the individual can be elevated "to the point where he is civilized enough to feel frustrated about the larger personal, social, and intellectual issues."[4] All these have been depicted through the violence emitted within the texts chosen for study.

Neurobiologist Jan Volavka emphasizes that, "violent behavior is defined as intentional physically aggressive behavior against another person."[5] Social scientists, Riane

Eisler and Walter Wink, who coined the phrase "the myth of redemptive violence," suggest that human violence, especially as organized in groups, is a phenomenon of the last five to ten thousand years. James Gilligan writes, "Violence is often pursued as an antidote to shame or humiliation."[6] The use of violence often is a source of pride and a defense of honor, especially among males who often believe violence defines manhood.[7] In this light, violence by itself may be defined in many ways. According to Hannah Arendt violence is:

> the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted.[8]

She goes on to say that:

> it is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength... [9]

'Violence', she writes, "…is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it."[10] However, she adds:

> And since when we act, we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing. [11]

Arendt is advocating that people should always refrain from taking a chance. However, she warns that with violence there is a danger that the means will overwhelm the end. Violence has been so central that especially in post-industrial societies, physical and psychological violence:

> Pervades the lives of many people around the world and touches all of (us) in some way. To many people, staying out of harm's way is a matter of locking

> doors and windows and avoiding dangerous places. To others, escape is not possible. The threat of violence is behind those doors – well hidden from public view. [12]

Similarly within such parameters, psychologists Hartogs and Artzt identify several types of violence in which organized violence is "patterned and deliberate". All organized violence is instrumental in the sense that it is one means of social combat among many, and it functions in a context of group interests and goals. The second type of violence is spontaneous violence, which is an "unplanned explosion set off by the unique chemistry of internal and external conditions". While organized violence is both instrumental and impersonal, spontaneous violence is reactive, compensatory, or gratuitous. As a reaction, it is a way of striking out directly against frustration. As compensation, it is a way of making up for frustrations suffered in the past. As gratuitous violence, it is a way of displacing aggression from an object which cannot be attacked (because it is too powerful or because it generates ambivalent feelings) to an object which is too weak to resist and which arouses clear feelings. Spontaneous violence may be collective or individual. The third type of violence identified by Hartogs and Artzt is pathological violence, which is committed by individuals and has a basis in either physical or mental illness.[13] The second type of violence defined by Hartogs and Artzt fits into the type of violence which Oates mentions in her works. She chose to portray characters which, in her own term:

> are bemused by the disparity between their stubborn dreams and the cultural and economic reality. [14]

Violence thus becomes the only solution for their inner malady and frustrations.

In Oates' novels there are notable elements of psychological violence and physical violence. Psychological/emotional violence involves trauma to the victim caused by acts, threats of acts, or coercive tactics. Psychological/emotional abuse can include, but is not limited to, humiliating the victim, controlling what the victim can and cannot do, withholding information from the victim, deliberately doing something to make the victim feel diminished or embarrassed, isolating the victim from friends and family, and denying the victim access to money or other basic resources. Her novels feature explicit violence which tends toward the depiction of psychological afflictions and obsessions. For instance, A Garden of Earthly Delights (1966), Expensive People(1968) and them(1969) – comprise a trilogy. These books deal explicitly and self-consciously with American culture, and the characters, much of them are the victims of violence, who are set respectively in rural, suburban, and urban America. According to Heinrich Popitz:

> Violence...is an integral part of social reality in the sense that it embodies an irreducible and omnipresent option of social action. [15]

Oates is aware of this omnipresence and the novels reflect "social and economic facts of life in America combined with unusually sensitive – but hopefully representative young men and women, who confront the puzzle of American life in different ways and come to different ends."[16]

A Garden of Earthly Delights is a novel that portrays the American economic system and the ills suffered both by those who fail and by those who succeed in it. The novel is set in the mythical Eden County whose name – like the novel's title – represents an ironic comment on the hardscrabble and often desperate economic conditions of its inhabitants. Oates has said that Eden County is actually a portrait of Erie County in western New York, where she grew up:

> I imagined the country named Eden with just certain similar elements. I don't know that it's paradise lost. It's not paradise at all. It's pretty bad as a matter of fact. [17]

In Oates' rendering, especially in her first two novels, (With Shuddering Fall and A Garden of Earthly Delights) Eden County suggests the underside of the American dream, depicting America's rural dispossessed battling for survival in an economically barren, often violent world. The concept of "difficult life conditions" is central to psychologist Ervin Staub's theory. He states that:

> Negative economic conditions...can create mental instability, which in turn leads people to seek solutions to their problems.[18]

In A Garden of Earthly Delights, Oates renders the portrait of characters who are aspiring to rise above the pettiness and stinginess of their lives, but however, remain victims of their society. They see money as the key to solution to their problems but sadly, they are betrayed by their vision. Oates narrates the story of Clara, from the day of her birth among migrant laborers to her waning years watching television in a nursing home, and the men—father, lovers, son—who define her life experience. The novel reflects a series of representative American environments and the novel treats violence and determinism, madness and death, and above all it connects the narrowness of its characters' rural upbringing with their psychological limitations. It also denotes a naturalistic expose of the stultifying conditions of rural poverty. Oates portrays dregs of rural itinerant workers, surrounded by wrecked automobiles, rotting vegetables, and the garbage of subsistence drudgery. In such a setting, her novel might be seen as an indictment of American capitalism and its exploitation and brutality. Her characters, in their frenzied search for self-realization, seemed motivated by the same crazed disintegration and self-destructiveness, and the intensity of the book's setting is

intended as a manifestation of a whole spiritual disintegration. Rose Marie Burtwell in "Joyce Carol Oates and an Old Master" has suggested that structurally the novel and the painting correspond even more precisely – the tripartite structure of the book commences with Clara's birth, follows her adolescence, ambition, and worldly success through Eden County, and ends with her family destroyed and Clara herself in a living hell, having gone mad and with her ambitions destroyed. Each of the three parts centers upon a man who is involved with the book's heroine – her father Carleton, her lover Lowry, her son Steven (or, as she prefers to call him, Swan). Each man enters into a complex, but ultimately mutually exploitative relationship with Clara, who sees this as part of a struggle to achieve selfhood, respectability and power. Clara's father, Carleton Walpole, is an itinerant fruit picker struggling through the Depression to repay debts, support his increasing family, and eventually, somehow, regain his family farm. He resents bitterly both his status and his forced association with hillbillies, blacks and Mexicans. He is especially frustrated by the futile determinism of poverty and transience. Men like Carleton Walpole, the novel suggests, suffer a continuous bruising of their human dignity that their accumulated rage and frustration become overwhelming. Almost against his will, Carleton beats his children – including his favorite, Clara:

> Carleton was pissed, seeing the look in the kid's face. Without so much as snapping his fingers to warn her, he swung his arm around and cracked her sneering face with the back of his hand, sent her backward onto the floor. [19]

Carleton's character is what Jung describes as "the shadow". He is hysterical to the extent that he is compelled "to torment others, because (he) is unwilling to hurt himself."

Along with the rest of his children, Clara grows up molded by this sense of deprivation, victimization and a feeling of being driven by complex movements within society beyond her control or understanding. Carleton, brooding and bitter, is aware there are

many complex facts he never understood which have poisoned his relationships and his sense of personal dignity. He is therefore dominated by "a moody, doughy look of dissatisfaction," "a restless boredom," which may erupt, unpredictably, in violence and madness. In introducing her characters in this novel, Oates' authorial comments are often too explicit but Carleton's deep-seated frustrations are as well, evoked through the grim squalor and ejaculations of angry violence which dominate the first part of the novel. Oates main concentration is not however, chronicling a family history set against the depression and the war. The social and economic facts swirl around confusedly, often contradictory and never analyzable in a systematic way, reflecting how they are puzzlingly apprehended by the characters themselves. What matters more than the dimly understood economic and social forces of Carleton's world are the forces that lie beneath: the intimacy of family ties, the confusion of sexual drives and, as Clara grows up Oates denotes Clara's own burning (and eventually tragic) desire for security, self-fulfillment and power.

A Garden of Earthly Delights is an attempt to use the violent flamboyance in American society as symbolic of psychological turmoil. The first part of the book concentrates on the fatalism of depression life and the erosion of Carleton's manhood from his family prosperity to a feeling of frustration:

> as if the air had turned hard and heavy above him, pushing him down.[20]

The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. It brought a rapid rise in the crime rate as many unemployed workers resorted to petty theft in order to put food on the table. Suicide rates rose, as did reported cases of malnutrition. Alcoholism increased with Americans seeking outlets for escape, compounded by the repeal of prohibition in 1933. [21] Victimized not just by economic repression but by an accompanying "restless boredom," Carleton turns to violence as his most immediate means

of self-assertion. Carleton's rage and frustration push him into killing a friend when a drunken scrap gets out of hand. His own life subsides finally into a meaningless death when Clara, his favorite daughter, runs away:

> …Carleton felt the trigger jerk as he rushed his enemy wielding the whip, swinging it until something exploded into his chest and his vision went out. And that was all. [22]

Ervin Staub claims that economic problems can threaten physical well-being and psychological instability. Carleton is a "lost soul" who is trapped in such, his baffled rage eventually leads to violence and a silent defeat. Having escaped her father's violence, Clara herself looks back with compassion at his plight:

> In the camps people just fell into things and that was that. The vast hot fields shimmering with light had been places like those misty spots in dreams where you might stumble and fall and fall forever; and so everyone had been lost right out in the daylight but had never known it. Her father had been lost...He would never get out of that sleep that spread so hot and heavy over the fields, dragging them all down. She would never see him again.[23]

Clara's own fate is being shaped by social and environmental circumstances. In the early chapters, Oates shows the child Clara and her friend Rosalie leaving the work camp and going into town for some "shopping." On their way they get picked up by a man in a truck, and though this brief scene suggests that he is a potential molester, Clara experiences her first conscious sexual feelings in a way that effectively disarms the man:

> A strange dizzy sensation overcame her, a sense of daring and excitement. She met his gaze with her own and smiled slowly, feeling her lips part slowly to

> show her teeth. She and the man looked at each other for a moment. He took his hand away from her knee. [24]

When they arrived at the five-and-ten, Clara's single dime will buy only an item she does not want – "an ugly little doll without clothes," an emblem of her own deprived childhood. Ashamed and embarrassed, Clara purchases the doll. She then discovers that Rosalie is an accomplished shoplifter and has cleaned out the store, and Clara imitates her by stealing an American flag from a front porch nearby. The flag symbolizes the culture of which girls like these (daughters of migrant laborers) are despised outcasts – "white trash," as Clara and her family are often called. This brief scene also emphasizes several issues that will control Clara's adult life: her economic plight and the shame and anger that it inspires. It also denotes her attraction to the toughness and self-sufficient cunning of someone like Rosalie, and especially her own developing sexuality and acquisitiveness as weapons against a society in which she has no inherited place and which denies her any opportunity for self-esteem.

Events occur rapidly. Clara becomes pregnant; Lowry (her lover and the father of her child) is threatened with arrest and is forced to run for Mexico. Faced with a future, abandoned by him, Clara wonders "how she would live out the rest of her life".[25] As Greg Johnson has noted, throughout the novel Oates suggests Clara's thralldom to what is not the American garden but the American machine:[26] she conceives of her future in terms of aggression, acquisition, and conquest, and thus unwittingly colludes with the materialistic society that has destroyed her parents and countless others like them. Oates achieves great pathos showing Clara as shakily "independent" and striving to improve her status both emotionally and materially, yet remaining an innocent but doomed child whose values have been distorted, understandably enough, by her early experience of poverty, ostracism and violence. Lowry, himself surviving on society's fringes by running bootleg whiskey, does

feel protective of Clara, but his helpless cynicism prevents any real union between them. Lowry's hardened, bitter philosophy only reinforces Clara's perception of aggression and violence as the keys to survival:

> To be safe from violence you have to be violent yourself – take the first step," he tells her. "That way you control it. You get inside it...You have to get inside it, get right inside it.[27]

In Lowry's absence Clara met Revere who offers her home and security and becomes his mistress. Although Revere is far from a ruthless capitalist figure – his love for Clara seems genuine. When Lowry returns after a long absence and drives out to offer her a life with him, Clara, rather than risk her security, is prepared to deny her love. She persuaded herself that she refused Lowry because of the child, and when he leaves she feels that Swan is "the one thing she had to hate, the only thing that had lost her Lowry."[28] However, there is something more fundamental at risk, and even Lowry mistakes her reason. He looks at Swan and snarls:

> I can see in your face you killed something already and you're going to kill lots of things…I can see it right there – all the things you're going to kill and step on and walk over.[29]

Near the end of the novel, Oates suggests again that the garden stands for America as a whole; as a child Clara had once stolen a tiny American flag when, as an adult, she asks Revere to buy her one:

> Clara had talked Revere into buying that flag. She had said that she was proud of being an American, and didn't want a flag? So they bought one and were American. [30]

This deadly irony escapes Clara; it is Swan who endures the burden of consciousness in the novel, by understanding both his mother's victimization and his own role as an heir to capitalist, landowning power. Though somewhat intellectual by nature, the teen-aged Swan is tormented by his own need for power:

> He could not go away to college because he was terrified of leaving this land, of relinquishing what he had won in his father. And he was terrified that he himself might forget the strange, almost magical air of Revere's world, those vast acres of land that lay beneath the magical name...If he kept reading, his mind would burst, but if he pushed his books aside and rejected everything, he would never learn all he had to learn – for knowledge was poor and he needed power. He could feel his insides aching for power as if for food. Between the two impulses he felt his muscles tense as if preparing themselves for violence. [31]

Swan thus follows the pattern of many of Oates' male characters, who use violence both in the pathetic effort to assert themselves, literally forcing acknowledgement from the outside world, and as a means of releasing unbearable psychological tension.

The final section of the book entitled "Swan," is remorseless in its intent but is somewhat less gripping than the first two parts. Clara's garden turns into hell. Her success and her final frustration are drawn out in a somber but somewhat anticlimactic fashion. Swan grows up as the bearer of his mother's fiercely possessive and ambitious will. Persecuted as a frail boy and a bastard, he is caught between instinctive love for his mother and a passion for his adopted family and their land which motivates his quiet accumulation of influence over Revere. Like Clara's and his own real father (which is Lowry), Swan instinctively turns into violence as an outlet for the conflicting demands which he feels within himself. Swan has

developed a confusing admiration for Revere himself, and eventually the confused energies which have been repressed and distorted emerge, typically in an act of radical violence like that of Carleton. He confronts Revere and Clara with a gun, while drunkenly searching for the conflicting truths which are destroying him. The gun goes off and, as Swan pulls it aside at the last minute, accidentally – and all the more horrible because it was an accident – Revere is killed. Swan then shoots himself. With Revere and Swan dead, Clara collapses, and ends up deranged in a hospital, perpetually in front of a television set:

> She seemed to like best programs that showed men fighting, swinging from ropes, shooting guns and driving fast cars, killing the enemy again and again until the dying gasps of evil men were only a certain familiar rhythm away from the opening blasts of the commercials, which changed only gradually over the years.[32]

Clara progresses from being Revere's mistress to being his wife, while naturally seeking this rise in her status as a personal victory and as an opportunity for Swan. Swan incidentally is a person that Revere feels is his own son, all due to her own misconceptions. Yet her rise toward economic security and power exacts a spiritual cost, which has resulted in the breakdown and suicide of her son, and finally her own breakdown. Clara, while watching television programs that depict violent conflicts between men that are alternated with commercials suggests the symbiotic force – violence and American capitalism – that have destroyed Clara's innocence and, finally, her spirit.

Expensive People deals with a spectrum of American social and economic patterns. In the novel there is a continuing concern with "personal" as opposed to "public" history, with stifling family ties, and with the fragility of the human personality which is caught up in oppressive social environments. The novel is presented as a memoir: Richard Everett, a

grotesquely fat eighteen-year-old living alone in a rented room, begins with a startling confession:

> I was a child murderer. [33]

Now that he has begun, he could keep on typing forever, but he warns the reader not to indulge upon any preconceptions about narrative form:

> My memoir...isn't well rounded or hemmed in by fate in the shape of novelistic architecture. It certainly isn't well planned. It has no conclusion but just dribbles off, in much the same way it begins.[34]

He insists, as he does throughout his memoir, that:

> This is not fiction. This is life.[35]

The opening chapters, then, initiate a frame device that is essential to understanding the novel; in terms of the ironic, desperate eighteen-year-old, who plans to commit suicide once his tale is told. These aspects are always evident as the hectoring, hostile storyteller, refusing to surrender the reader to the story itself or to permit the illusion of reality, the reassuring verisimilitude, commonly achieved in the realistic novel. Elizabeth Janeway sees Richard as an "11 year-old Joe Christmas in bifocals and blue blazer, blasting away at his mother," and Richard himself asks the reader to imagine him as "Hamlet stunted at eleven years of age."[36] The book is in that American novelistic tradition of family violence in which one family member murders another while oppressing family members.[37] Greg Johnson mentions that, " At its core Expensive People is a satire on America's paradise of materialism and a clear statement of the moral and psychological consequences of the American dream at a particular moment in history." [38] Child molestation is depicted within Expensive People. The role and depiction is suitably convoluted, as befits this deliberately odd novel. Expensive People poses

as the memoirs of Richard Everett, a disturbed teenager who murdered his mother, a successful writer, when he was only eleven and who is planning to commit suicide after he has finished writing his memoir.

According to Freud:

> Much of our sense of morality derives from the self-restraints we learn as young children during the Oedipal phase of development. [39]

In this light due to the nature of their relationship with their parents, some children never come to develop their restraints, and therefore lack an underlying sense of morality. This is the case of Richard and therefore, violence becomes an affirmation of his freedom. Richard buys the mail-order rifle which he will eventually use to kill his mother after reading and re-reading "some twenty, thirty times" a short story called "The Molesters," written by his mother and published in *The Quarterly Review of Literature*.[40] It is a case of art deliberately and consciously feeding off itself: "The Molesters" was indeed first published in *The Quarterly Review of Literature* by Joyce Carol Oates. The short story which has been interpolated into Expensive People has only one sexual abuser in the story but, as the title says, more than one "molester." It is told in three parts, each of which begins with the sentence "I am six years old." In the first section, the girl is sexually molested by a male stranger but remains psychologically whole. In the following segments, the child is progressively more traumatized: in the second part she tells her frantic mother that "I like him. I like him better than you!"[41] and, in the final section, she has come to believe in her own contamination because the abuser "did something terrible, and what was terrible came onto me, like black tar you can't wash off."[42]

As Greg Johnson observes:

> the man's gentleness and her own innocence preclude any immediate sense of guilt or violation. Rather it is the hysterical, mean-spirited reaction of her parents that 'molests' her consciousness with intimations of evil.[43]

Here, in this story in which "the parents are the more dangerous molesters,"[44] Oates appears to champion the views of Alfred Kinsey on the subject:

> It is difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed by having its genitalia touched, or disturbed by seeing the genitalia of another person. . . . Some of the more experienced students of juvenile problems have come to believe that the emotional reactions of the parents, police, and other adults . . . may disturb the child more seriously than the contacts themselves.[45]

Kinsey's interpretation has been blasted by feminists, amongst them Florence Rush, who said that "With the usual male arrogance, Kinsey could not imagine that a sexual assault on a child constitutes a gross and devastating shock and insult, and so he blamed everyone *but* the offender."[46]

In the first part of the novel, Richard confesses his matricide and the family moves to Fernwood; Nada abandons her son and husband for the third time; and his father tells Richard that Nada had wanted an abortion when she was pregnant with him. Part one ends with Richard's destruction of the Record's Room of the Johns Begemoth Boy's School. In Part Two, Richard secretly reads the notebook in which Nada, who is a writer, scribbles her ideas for stories; they move to an even more expensive house in Cedar Grove, where Nada reappears; Richard reads Nada's story, "The Molesters," and thereupon purchases a mail-order rifle. In Part Three, Nada again betrays Richard and his father with a lover; Richard attends a lecture on sexuality; he has a mad spell in a flower bed; he hides in a closet and

overhears Nada and her lover; he begins his career as a sniper, going out three times, purposely missing the victims, and the fourth time he kills Nada. He discovers that Nada was born Nancy Romanow, daughter of poor immigrants and he sees a psychiatrist, and his father remarries. At eighteen he writes a memoir in a one-room apartment and eats his way into obesity.

Richard's attitude towards both Frenwood and Nada remains conflicted between sardonic deprecation and helpless attachment. As the narrator he often talks of Nada's lovelessness and hypocrisy:

> I think that most American women would like to be Nada – that is, the image, the dream self that was Nada, not the real, unhappy, selfish, miserable, and rather banal person. [47]

As a protagonist, yearning for maternal love, he works anxiously to meet his mother's selfish demands and even, despite all contrary evidence, clings to an idealized notion of a stable nurturing Nada who might return to him someday as:

> A person absolutely free and meaning no harm, no harm. [48]

However, soon enough, Richard understands the depth of Nada's selfishness. Surrendering to his rage, he vandalizes the school Records Room and is soon weeping and "vomiting over everything." Part one ends in a characteristically Oatesian violent climax: Richard's lack of emotional nurture and his victimization by the false values of suburbia have led him to his first overt expression of rage – the same rage, that eventually brings him to type out the memoir entitled *Expensive People*. In part two of the novel, when Nada abandons her husband and son, Richard undergoes a startling change:

> There was something mysterious going on. I felt strange and inert, like a sleepwalker, and even when I did want to wake up I couldn't. [49]

As the source of his anxiety disappeared, Richard begins sneaking into her study, discovering notes for a story called "The Sniper" – a story that he will act out later in the novel, when he stalks the streets of Cedar Grove with his mail-order shotgun. Like Nada, he vents his own emotion in writing and like Nada he will be destroyed by his own inability to render love and compassion in the context of human relationships. Moreover, both mother and son transform early emotional insecurity into a need for power that gradually replaces the need for love: Nada seeks social standing and material possessions to fill her internal void, while Richard must finally possess Nada herself (through murdering her, whether in fantasy or fact). He uses food to help allay his emotional hungers, and then write his angry memoir as:

> A hatchet to slash through my own heavy flesh and through the flesh of anyone else who happens to get in the way. [50]

Power becomes significant. As Hannah Arendt states, "Power is psychological, a moral force that makes people want to obey." [51] Richard finds himself aching for power, as if for food and actually becomes addicted to food while attempting to fill an interior vacancy and sense of powerlessness as fortification against a threatening outer world. Richard's ultimate frustration becomes so great that he resorts to killing one of his parents. The world which is conveyed in Expensive People and the rancorous narrator produced by that world are mutually destructive. The suburban world's false values destroy an innocent child and literally drive him mad and in turn, the child mercilessly satirizes that world while exposing its hypocrisy and spiritual emptiness. Richard is condemned to endure a 'life sentence of freedom,' which is removed from the possibility of human relationships, sexual maturity and fulfillment of any kind:

> There was this peculiar hollowness inside me that I had to fill – but that's just sentiment, ignore it. [52]

Almost certainly he is doomed to suicide, while finally questioning the morality of pure "freedom,' since his story, as Greg Johnson suggests that people with freedom and power inevitably use them toward destructive ends. [53]

Expensive People made it very clear that Oates was exploiting just those aberative aspects of her fiction. She goes behind the surface of American society and she encounters the unpredictable absurdities, contradictions, violence and paradox of dream. "No story is really fiction," she has written; "the aim of a serious, respectable art is to externalize personal, private, shapeless fantasies into structures that are recognizable to other people."[54] What Expensive People shapes into is the self-consciousness that has, both historically and mythically, created the America that it reflects. As John Fraser notes in *Violence in the Arts*:

> Some violence makes for intellectual clarity and a more civilized consciousness, while others make for confusion.[55]

If Oates' fiction leads to a sense of confusion, this is so in order to reflect the confusion which is inherent in human life and to push on toward a new consciousness. Charles K. Bellinger states:

> Only when one begins to ask how life can be lived or to wonder if a careless move can unhinge the universe, can one begin to see how one can take hold of his/her life and avoid the careless move. [56]

The drama of the self-enclosed personality, of the 'introverted libido" that permeates Oates' novels, suggests an infinity with Freud who thought of the psyche as profoundly narcissistic.[57] Freud argued that one of the deepest impulses of the psyche is to overpower

and incorporate the world in order to resist division into the self and the world.[58] Yet, with Freud, Oates insists that the division of self from world is the essential nature of reality and that implies an adjustment to its demands. In them for instance, the characters' confrontations with the fluidity and violence of American culture have the effect of imposing sudden and startling revelations of their powerlessness and dependency. Although Oates lived in Detroit for a relatively brief period (1962-68), the city became a powerful influence on her fiction. Her six years that were spent there were "a sentimental education,' and the city became her:

> 'Great' subject: it made me the person I am, consequently the writer i am – for better or worse. I see now in retrospect that the extraordinary emotional impact Detroit had on me in those years must have been partly due to the awakening of submerged memories of childhood and adolescence in and around the equally 'great' city of Buffalo, New York. But Detroit was – still is? – Motor City, U.S.A. For a while Murder City, U.S.A. [59]

Some of the violent material of Oates' fiction was originally culled from Detroit newspaper stories, and while her work shows a taut awareness of the city's turbulence, she has also called Detroit "a place of romance." [60] Its very bleakness and unpredictability, as well as its vitality, have evidently symbolized for Oates some of the basic conditions of twentieth-century America, an "imperishable reality' that she finds inspiring, compelling. [61] In them Oates remarks that:

> All of Detroit is melodrama, and most lives in Detroit fated to be melodramatic.[62]

Although some reviewers criticize the novel for its many lurid and violent episodes, Oates insisted in her "Author's Note" that she had actually toned down the reality of inner-city Detroit:

> Nothing in the novel has been exaggerated in order to increase the possibility of drama – indeed, the various sordid and shocking events of slum life, detailed in other naturalistic works, have been understated here, mainly cause of my fear that too much reality would become unbearable. [63]

The various rapes, beatings, and murders which punctuate the action of them do represent the daily threats to the aspect of survival that was endured by Detroit's urban poor between 1936, when the novel opens, and 1967, when the violence becomes general in the series of riots occuring in the summer of that year. [64] Like A Garden of Earthly Delights and Expensive People it follows a conscious and somewhat allegorical design:

> These novels are put together in parallel construction,

Oates remarked soon after them appeared:

> Each deals with a male imagination and consciousness that seeks to liberate itself from certain confinements. [65]

Swan in A Garden of Earthly Delights and Richard in Expensive People had both sought a desperate liberation through the murder of their parents. Jules Wendall, who is the central male character in them, had also sought freedom through violence, thereby becoming:

> A kind of American success in an ironic sense, of course. He is a hero and a murderer at once. [66]

Based on the story of one of Oates' own students at the University of Detroit, them also chronicles the troubled life of Maureen Wendall who is shaped by irrationality, extreme emotions and violence. The real Maureen wrote to Oates:

> This is a work of history in fictional form," that is, in personal perspective, which is the only kind of history that exists.[67]

The book is a tripartite account of two generations of the Wendall family, whose lives never 'make newspaper headlines' but is nonetheless darkly determined by the limiting, hostile environment of Detroit. There is a process of almost ritualistic disintegration as marriages break, relationships fail, and as private history connects with the public world; cities are burnt and political and personal discontent erupt into violence. Life seems primarily a struggle for survival not only with the world but with forces inside the psyche. To battle with oneself and survive is a kind of art – as indeed the novelist's own. In an interview Oates mentions that the Wendalls are:

> Americans of a certain class and era – infected, in part, by the glamour of America, the adventure of aggressive and futile dreams – but they are not Americans most of us know. Neither impoverished enough to be italicized against the prodigious wealth of their culture, nor affluent enough to be comfortably assimilated into it, the Wendalls exist – and they continue to exist – in a world for which, for the most part, despair itself is a luxury, incompletely understood, and failure unthinkable: because no American and no public models for failure are available with whom the disenfranchised might identify. If their lives are temporarily "unhappy," it never occurs to such people (not even the quick, intelligent, sweetly crafty Jules) that their dreams are at fault for having deluded them. They think instead, and indeed must

> continue to think, that success – that is, "happiness" – lies not far ahead in the future and can be grasped if only one knows how to play the game.[68]

In most of the works of Oates' especially (from1964 to 2011) she is fixated with the physical and psychological violence that torment men and women in particular. One of Oates' persistent concerns is to make the tragic vision real. Continuously, her fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence. In the novel, the reality created by the narrative is so strong that John Alfred Avant comments, "what we ourselves have witnessed seems bland in comparison, and we can't believe that they could affect the character' lives." [69] them records how Detroit feels to its inhabitants. The story employs the typical ultra dramatic surface of Oates' gothic parables: murder, rape, insanity, industrial accidents, arson, prostitution and violence of all kinds. The opening scenes, in particular, are shocking. Sixteen-year-old Loretta dresses dreamily for a Saturday night with her boyfriend Bernie. Her brother Brock adds to her excitement by pulling a gun from his pocket. By the end of the evening, Loretta has made love to Bernie, she wakes in the morning to find next to her Bernie's dead, bleeding body, shot by her brother next to her. Hysterical, she searches out the local cop, Howard Wendall, who comes to investigate. Apalled and angered, he screams at Loretta and then rapes her. While they struggle, she thinks of her dead boyfriend, realizing as he pulls up her dress, that:

> She had loved him and he was dead and she would never see him again…He was dead, it was over, finished, that was the end of her youth. She tries not to think of it again. [70]

Pregnant, she marries Howard Wendall and settles into a life of depression, economic insecurity, and deprivation. Oates deals with the social and economic roots of the characters through minute details. There is a shift from the rural background, which is something like

Eden Country, into run down Detroit, with its poverty, violence, patrol cars, garbage, predatory sexuality, unemployment, and psychic as well as economic security. "To whose Country Have I come?" is the title of Part 2 of the novel, and it is as if the reader is essentially once again in the world of A Garden of Earthly Delights where Carleton's rage at dispossession of land and family has become the dominant mood of the frustrated Wendalls. As the novel shifts towards Maureen, she has felt herself emptied out. Sensitive, gentle Maureen:

> Having no hardness in her: is forced to creep into silence where she can wait for the day when everything would be orderly and neat, when she could arrange her life the way she arranged the kitchen after supper, and she too might be frozen hard, fixed permanent, beyond their ability to hurt: Maureen is too simple and guileless to protect herself. Because she does not or cannot become "frozen hard," she constantly teeters on the brink of "breaking into pieces. [71]

She has nothing but contempt for her situation and mainly this is reserved for Furlong, whose heavy, smelly, hairy presence is a desecration even of their minimal home. Her brother Jules had felt that way about their father, and now she about her stepfather:

> There was nothing in her but a hatred for him so diffuse that it was like her own blood, cursing mechanically through her. She ransacked her mind but there was nothing in it. Everything was emptied out, exhausted. She might have been inhabiting her mother's body.[72]

Even books can no longer stir her. Maureen has to learn how to deal with emptiness, and her success or failure is, for Oates, a paradigm of what women must do- that emptiness, for her, defines in the main where women are.[73] Loretta sinks into it and Maureen still has options,

however circumscribed. “She has to get out, the way Jules had…she had to get out.”[74] Wounded both physically and psychologically, Maureen retreats into a conservative, self defensive position that will control the remainder of her life. At age twenty-six the real Maureen had written to Oates:

> Inside my body and face I am an old woman, not even a woman or a man but just an old person...I want to marry a man and fall in love and be protected by him. I am ready to fall in love. But my heart is hard and my body hard, frozen.[75]

Alternating her story with that of her mother and brother, the novel has dramatized powerfully the effects of a harsh environment on a sensitive young girl. As Walter Sullivan remarks:

> We watched the brutalization of this perceptive and innocent and essentially decent child...These sequences succeed absolutely. They transcend themselves and become images of our general loneliness and spiritual isolation. [76]

The real Maureen, having vented her frustration in the letters to Oates, deliberately seduces a young college instructor away from his family and marries him. Ultimately, in the novel, she reacts to her brutal early life by cutting herself off from her family, her past, and any possibility of genuine caring, preferring instead a life of sterile conventionality as a housewife in Dearborn, Michigan. When her beloved brother, Jules, comes to see her at the end of the novel, she rejects him as well:

> She pressed her hands against her ears. She was going to have a baby, she was heavy wit pregnancy, but sure-footed, pretty, clean. Married. She did not look at him. [77]

Maureen has taken, from her viewpoint, the only logical step: away from the squalor, uncertainty, and violence of the past, and toward the kind of safety that is found not in books but through navigating shrewdly in the real world, finding one's own niche and exercising one's own power – in Maureen's case, sexual power. Thus Maureen is both pathetic and admirable, a victim who nonetheless survives and continues to live in her own limited but self-defined terms.

Charlotte Goodman states that, "Oates' young women seek relationships with men as a means of adding excitement or fulfillment to their lives". Like many of her characters, Maureen also experiences feelings of depersonalization and disembodiment. In The Divided Self, R.D. Laing speaks of these feelings as being characteristic of:

> individuals who fear that their own identity is in constant danger of being obliterated. Such individuals tend to see themselves and others as objects rather than people... To turn oneself into stone becomes a way of not being turned into a stone by someone else.[78]

Laing also denotes that turning others into objects serves to rob them of their power. Likewise, many of Oates' characters see themselves or others as objects. In the circumstance, Maureen felt something 'snap', which meant she could control her emotional life, and she could use the one thing she had to make money: her body. The man she sells herself to, offers kindness, interest, and money, which she saves in a 'book of poetry' – a practice that leads to her undoing, when Furlong discovers her cache and beats her. In describing Maureen's physical reaction to a man's body, Oates is superb:

> Her skin was a man's skin, a little rough…A man was like a machine; one of those machines at the laundromat where she dragged the laundry.[79]

By turning sexual intercourse into a laundry cycle, Maureen has discovered her way out: mechanizing feeling, she controls it, whereas the man will always be humbled by it. She has learnt what Loretta also found, that men can be manipulated, despite their physical power and their desire for domination.

Like Oates' characters elsewhere, the Wendalls are haunted by dreams of autonomy or power, but their high desires find only the crudest, dullest materializations – merely "the freedom of trucks and trains and planes" or, more limiting, the apparent autonomy of material security. Life as opposed to the dream is crude, deceptive, and violent. "A certain number of boys must grow up to die in the electric chair"[80] is the resigned belief of Jules' school principal, and behind such fatalism is the acceptance that impotence and futility can be escaped only – and then temporarily – by violence. Loretta and Maureen represent two kinds of survival: giving oneself up to the constant, violent flux of life, as Loretta does and becoming tough and resilent in the process; and hardening oneself to the environment and to all other people, as Maureen does, as a defense against further suffering. 'The male-oriented power struggle,' [81] symbolized by the seething violence of Detroit, certainly vitiates the human potential of both Loretta and Maureen, forcing them into relatively shallow, distorted lives. Partly because he is male, and partly because he is the most imaginative and daring of the three characters, Jules Wendall is able to deal more effectively than his mother and sister with the soul- destroying forces of Detroit. Like his mother and sister, however, Jules suffers the brutality of his environment throughout his youth: a policeman chases him through the night-shrouded slums and tries to kill him:

> He pulled the trigger, but it clicked upon an empty chamber. [82]

He beats him unconscious; he is beaten and perhaps sodomized at a juvenile detention center; he endures the constant and sometimes violent dislocations of his family life, including his

father's accidental death and the beating of his sister by Furlong. Musing on his father's defeated life, he understands that the defeat had an economic basis; but he has a strong sense of his own freedom and potential:

> Money was an adventure. It was open to him. Anything could happen. He felt that his father's essence, that muttering dark anger, had surrounded him and almost penetrated him, but had not quiet penetrated him; he was free. [83]

Towards the near end of the novel, Oates narrates the relationship of Jules and Nadine in which the latter resents her lover's dark power over her. She first abandons him and then tries to kill him. She remains:

> The deathly woman standing at the very brink of Jules's life. [84]

Even though Jules narrowly escapes death, as has happened before in the novel, the last sentence of book two suggests that even the optimistic Jules may be suffering a death of the spirit:

> The spirit of the Lord departed from Jules. [85]

If Jules is liberated through this affair, therefore, it is a liberation into the knowledge of limits, into recognizing the falsity of the American dream that Nadine, with her beauty and her money, had represented to his naive, unexamined outlook as a young man. Thus, in the novel's last movement, Jules is a temporarily enervated, cynical figure, on the fringes of political radicalism in Detroit just before the 1967 riots. Instinctively, this time, seeking redemption not in love but in violence. In dealing with the political circumstances surrounding the Detroit riots, Oates reverts to "the gothic, darkly comic mode of Expensive People."[86] Jules drifts into the company of immature, self-glorifying "radicals" – led by the babbling and overweight Mort Piercy, cast from the same mold as Richard Everett

(Expensive People)– who spend hours discussing which political leaders they might assassinate for the best "dramatic effect." Mocking Jules's secret thoughts, they ask him:

> Who should we kill, Jules? If you had your finger on the trigger, who would you kill? [87]

By killing a policeman during the chaos of the riots – shooting him pointblank in the face – Jules Wendall does achieve his dark, ironic liberation. Although his murder of the policeman has been interpreted as signaling a "shift into nihilism," the shooting is, in its essence, an allegorical act. [88] Here, the reader is reminded of the policeman who tried to murder the innocent, teen-age Jules. He saw that Jules has achieved liberation by placing himself on an equal footing, at last, with his violent surroundings. Through his many experiences of love and violence, Jules Wendall has incorporated into his own consciousness the essence of Detroit and significantly of America. Unlike Loretta and Maureen, who have accommodated themselves to the surrounding reality and have in the process, become distorted, pathetic figures, Jules maintains his heroic stature by assimilating the full horror of his experiences, along with their social implications, and then continuing forward into a new and imagined sphere of life. He has escaped a criminal environment only by becoming – in a single, allegorical act of violence – a criminal himself. According to Hannah Arendt:

> Violence often springs from rage is a commonplace, and rage can indeed be irrational and pathological, but so can every other human affect...but this does not mean that they become animal-like; and under such conditions, not rage and violence, but their conspicuous absence is the clearest sign of dehumanization.[89]

However, by the end of the novel, Jules has understood the Detroit riots and his own violent act not as an apocalyptic ending but as the preparation for further growth. For this reason he

is, “a hero and a murderer at once.” Liberating himself through violence – physically, psychologically, and spiritually – he does not accept defeat but rather moves forward as an ironic hero of American culture, ready for a new stage of being.

As Elizabeth Janeway observes, Oates’ characters are pulled two ways, looking for a natural identity in a permanent world, but bemused by injunctions from the chaotic present that hold up to them the gaudy goals which authority tells them to value. At the same time, their natural sense assures them that these goals are irredeemably false. These characters who are confused, obsessed on the verge of slipping from one persona to another, rage through it in so violent and lively a fashion that they redeem it. The violent chaos of their lives drives them to seek even the most superficial semblance of order. The Falls, is set in the 1950s, near Oates' own hometown in Niagara Falls. The heroine Ariah Littrell is widowed on her disastrous wedding night when her new husband, (a homosexual minister) commits suicide by throwing himself into the Niagara Falls. After the harrowing and detailed description of the suicide, the almighty power of the falls is captivating and terrifying. Clearly the powers of the falls are paramount to the tension of the book: “the roar of The Falls. Like the blood-roar in the ears.” [90] It is a haunting story of the powerful spell that Niagara Falls casts upon two generations of a family, leading to tragedy, love, loss, and, ultimately, redemption. A man climbs over the railings and plunges into the Niagara Falls. A newlywed, he has left behind his wife, Ariah Erskine, in the honeymoon suite the morning after their wedding. “The Widow Bride of The Falls,” as Ariah comes to be known, begins a relentless, seven-day vigil in the mist, waiting for his body to be found. At her side throughout, confirmed bachelor and pillar of the community Dirk Burnaby is unexpectedly transfixed by the strange, otherworldly gaze of the plain, strange woman, falling in love with her though they barely exchange a word. What follows is their passionate love affair, marriage, and children - a seemingly perfect existence. However, the tragedy by which their life together began shadows them,

damaging their idyll with distrust, greed, and even murder. Oates gives a compelling presentation of individuals who are plunged into various kinds of emotional and psychological violence, and combined with the larger social and political crisis.

In the beginning of the novel Ariah Litrell has a mental condition which she maintains for the rest of her life. Though she is terrified of sex and disgusted by her own body, at 29 "she would have gladly traded her soul for an engagement ring," Oates writes. The daughter of a prominent minister, she is thrilled to be marrying another minister, even if she doesn't really love him, even if she knows he cannot love her, because she is "an old maid." Ariah had been married to Gilbert Erskine when she discovers his suicide note:

> Ariah sorry – I can't –
>
> I tried to love you
>
> I am going where my pride takes me…[91]

Ariah seems to be another of Oates' nearly somnambulistic child-women, and her equally neurasthenic husband had tossed himself into the Falls because he was in love with a man! The truth is unbearable for Ariah:

> The hurt. The humiliation. The unspeakable shame. Not grief, not yet. The shock was too immediate for grief.[92]

At the heart of the novel is the story of their marriage and the family that they built together through the 1950s and early 1960s. Dirk loves his wife and their three children, his law firm grows more prosperous, and the Burnaby's enjoy an idyllic suburban existence. Except that Ariah wields a kind of psychological brutality, cutting away anything unpleasant and anything that troubles her. These include memories of her first husband, news of the world,

the complexity of her new husband's legal work, the friendly invitations of the neighbors and even telephone calls. Ariah's case is in Freud's term, "a completely automatic psychological defense against emotional trauma and does not involve conscious intent. In contrast, deliberately pushing something out of awareness because you want to avoid any responsibility for it is called suppression." Ariah wants to be free from all the emotional traumas that she had encountered in the past:

> It's all banished in a flurry of anxious protests and ferocious pleading. She alternately shrieks and cajoles, stares down anyone who crosses her, or runs from the room with hands over her ears.[93]

The story evokes through the confusion of metaphysical, physical and emotional yearning, and the fragility of the personality in sexual love and tragedy of inner fear. Oates herself has commented upon how many readers have found its evocation of paranoid paralysis which is disturbingly true of the relationships of the Burnaby's.[94] In doing so she asks ruefully what such recognition suggests about American marriages – but, furthermore, upon the question of the contemporary psyche. Love has been understood as a surprising reaffirmation of the deepest hopes, and to refuse its fulfillment is to acknowledge that people lack the courage to live except in the shallows of life.

Their rapturous happiness was shadowed only by Ariah's illogical conviction over the years that Dirk would leave her and their three children someday. Her unreasonable fear becomes self-fulfilling when her increasingly unstable behavior, combined with Dirk's obsessed but chaste involvement with Nina Olshaker, a young mother who enlists his help in alerting the city fathers to the pestilential conditions in the area (later to be known as Love Canal), opens a chasm in their marriage. His gentle heart is inspired by a need for justice and Dirk takes on the powerful, corrupt politicians, his former colleague and friends, in a

disastrous lawsuit that ruins him socially and financially and even results in his death. Oates adroitly addresses the material of this "first" class action lawsuit and makes the story fresh and immediate. "In the end, all drama is about family," a character muses, and while the narrative occasionally lapses into melodrama in elucidating this theme, Oates spins a haunting story in which nature and humans are equally rapacious and self-destructive.

Ariah struggles with depression and a premonition that Dirk will abandon her as her first husband did. At this point, the novel rather disconcertingly changes tone. While the first chapters are very broadly painted and not bound to a specific time, the middle portion is firmly grounded in America circa 1961. Dirk accepts the first case involving Love Canal, the infamous environmental disaster in which hazardous waste was dumped into a trench, covered with soil and then sold later to the Niagara Falls Board of Education. As Dirk becomes more and more passionate about the case, he discovers that his friends and colleagues are directly responsible for the disaster and are actively covering it up. Ariah becomes more and more unbalanced, because she is convinced that Dirk is having an affair. Unfortunately, the case is dismissed before it even gets to trial, and Dirk is murdered in what looks like a car accident. Ariah's premonition that Dirk would leave her becomes true, and she is left to raise three children on her own.

Black Girl/ White Girl follows the story of two roommates in an exclusive liberal arts college. Fifteen years after the mysterious death of Minette, a 19 year old black student, her former roommate Genna begins an official enquiry into the traumatic events. This leads her to reconstruct her own life as the daughter of a famous radical lawyer and the time of crisis following the end of the Vietnam War. Haunted for 15 years by the brutal death of her enigmatic college roommate — a merit scholarship student named Minette Swift, who is the title's black girl — Genna embarks on what she calls a "text without a title in the service of

justice," a personal "inquiry" in which she attempts to reconstruct the events of the fateful year when she and Minette were freshmen. Minette, she explains, didn't die a "natural" or an "easy" death, and "I was the one to have saved her, yet I did not."

In a 1903 essay, DuBois wrote:

> The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.[95]

This continues to be a problem in the present century. Violence is the consuming fire of racism and racist ideology is its alchemical rationalization:

> It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the struggles goes on...The "American Dilemma" referred to it in the title of this book is (this) ever-raging conflict between, on the one hand, the values preserved on the general plane which we shall call the "American creed," where the American thinks, talks and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific planes of individual group living, where personal and local interests; economic, social and sexual jealousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people; and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses and habits dominate his outlook. [96]

American racism is a moral contradiction, an unresolved tension between the universal rights of man and the manifold particularities of everyday experience. In Myrdal's view, it is the product of a 'vicious circle of cumulative causation', which preserves the Blacks as an inferior caste within what is otherwise a relatively open if still class-constructed society. [97]

White racist violence is one aspect of the systematic mistreatment of the black people and hence a constant condition of black life in American society.

On March 1963, Martin Luther King delivered his famous speech, "I Have a Dream". Martin Luther King did not want people to be "judged by the color of their skin, but the content of their character." He was determined that the dream should become a reality. Oates seems to believe that despite the entire outcry, racism remains in the minds of people, and violence as well as white supremacist organizations still exist. Charles Gilmer says:

> If racism itself is ever eliminated, it will only fade away with time, being replaced by another prejudice belittling a part of society. [98]

He further states:

> Prejudices have proven to be inevitable in human society and will continue until the end of time. Martin Luther King Jr. played a major part in today's problem, and will have an impact on what is to come.[99]

Black Girl/ White Girl is set in the mid-1970s on the campus of Schuyler, an East Coast women's college which was proud of its liberal traditions and scholarships for “people of color”. Generva Meade, “well-behaved to the point of invisibility”, is delighted to be placed with a black roommate, Minette Swift, and yearns to become her best friend. As the story unfolds, Oates, through her character Dana Johnson (the resident advisor in Haven House) mentions the condition of Minette Swift:

> ...your roommate is black. Of course she feels vulnerable. We, in our white skins, what can we possibly know...![100]

Minette becomes the victim of a campaign of racial harassment which begins with her textbook being 'vandalized' and this makes Genna wonder:

> A racist, or racists, in Haven House; was it possible?...I would wonder if the act hadn't been personal, aimed against Minette Swift as an individual, and not "racist." Yet how swiftly and crudely the personal becomes the racial! As if beneath ordinary hatred, there is a deeper, more virulent and deadly hatred to be tapped. [101]

She could not comprehend why:

> Some girls wished to provoke and hurt others, why feuds and hatreds flared up with the rapacity of wildfire...Why hurt another person? [102]

As the interaction between Minette and Genna progresses so does Genna's understanding of her own eventful past; a past concerning her father, who is a prominent lawyer. He was an extreme liberal during the Vietnam war era, and her mother was quite the flower child of the hippie cult. The story takes a tragic turn when Minette dies under mysterious circumstances and Genna is forced to drop out of college. This is in fact where the novel starts, with Genna trying to decipher what really happened to Minette Swift and whether she was in any way responsible for her death:

> I'd lied to protect Minette from exposure and in that circuitous I had caused her death. Now I am an adult, and in control of my behavior. I will never make such mistakes again. Between happiness and duty, I choose duty.[103]

After this point Genna is no longer the pacifist, the listener or the appeaser. She faces and recognizes some harsh truths about herself, her family, and about rich white liberal America. Genna's unraveling of the incidents surrounding Minette's death strips the veneer

off of some racial issues of the time. However, Oates strikingly exposed the liberal hypocrisy of white America during the 70s, and the resultant guilt that had sprung forth from it. To put it in Genna, the "White girl's" words, "I was the one to have saved her, yet I did not."[104]

Unlike the other girls in Schuyler College, Genna looks at Minette with a different eye. Her 'color' meant nothing to her. She is after all Maximilian Elliot Meads' daughter, the man who lectured on "radical political consciousness" of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Engels and Nietzsche and wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on "Identity in Democracy: Freedom in Peril." 'Max. Meade' wanted to bridge the gap between the black and the white and Genna wanted to follow her father footsteps but her roommate had failed to co-operate:

> I wanted so badly to speak with Minette at such times when we were alone together yet not obliged to look at each other, when we were neither in one place nor in another, shivering with cold, I wanted to ask Minette about her life,… but I dared not for I knew that I would blunder, and Minette would be offended.[105]

An intriguing turn of the plot in the last third of the novel seems to promise much, but it ends up making Oates' portraits of Genna and Minette less satisfying. Genna Meade is a first year student at an all women's liberal arts college in Schuyler, Pennsylvania in 1974 and 1975. Racial tensions run high, even in that politically liberal environment, in part because the college is still mostly white. Genna is the descendant of the college's founder and she shares a room with Minette Swift, a black and a preacher's daughter from Washington, D.C. Genna tells the story of her roommate's death in this novel. On the surface, the girls couldn't seem more different. Genna is guiltily privileged, self-effacing and eager to please, while Minette swells with a sense of entitlement. As the daughter of a powerful and charismatic minister from Washington, D.C., Minette feels morally, spiritually and intellectually superior

to her classmates. This makes her roundly unpopular with black and white alike, but it inspires in Genna a fierce loyalty that increases as the harassment of Minette begins and then escalates. This loyalty is matched only by Genna's determination to protect the reputation of the college which her family had founded. The two girls were roommates, and their differences were clear in terms of class, culture and identity. However, there were similarities between them, too: They were both born in April 1956. One ground her teeth; the other used to. They both had a formidable father in public life. They had co-dependent mothers — one was into substance abuse; the other was into food. One girl was rich; the other was not. However, there were differences in sensibility too. Genna loves being at college because that way she can be away from her overbearing "hippie" mother and her lawyer father. She does not want to accept calls from her mother and she avoids her like the plague when she comes to visit and she is generally happy to be away from home. Minette, on the other hand, is homesick. and nearly daily receives care packages from them as well. Genna and Minette however, attempt to become friends in spite of their differences.

Genna's observations, fifteen years after Minette's mysterious death, suggest that she is only beginning to understand the myriad ways in which black and white can yield so many shades of gray. When she wonders, thinking back, if a crucial act "hadn't been purely personal, aimed against Minette Swift as an individual, and not 'racist,'" she must also acknowledge "how swiftly and crudely the personal becomes the racial." In the end, she is still:

> Riddled with guilt like rot or cancer, but like an afflicted person I seem not always to know where my affliction lies.[106]

Throughout the academic year, Minette is subjected to mean-spirited racially based harassment. The harassment begins with seemingly harmless pranks and it increases in

magnitude throughout the year, with derogatory notes being left for her and derogatory words being written on the doorway, as well as glass being thrown on the shower floor just before she takes a shower. What Minette is being subjected here is psychological violence:

> There must have been something curious about the envelope in Minette's mailbox for she turned it in her hand, frowning; opened it, and pulled out the sheet of plain white paper, gave her hurt little cry and froze…on a plain sheet of ordinary typing paper, in mismatched letters scissor out from a newspaper or magazine – 'NIGGR GO HOME.' Minette had dropped the envelope. Judith stooped to pick it up. The envelope had no stamp or postmark. Here too were the mismatched cutout letters with a look of mockery: MIN SWIFT. [107]

Genna valiantly strives to protect Minette from these harmful words, images and actions, initially because acceptance has been ingrained in her by her activist father and later because she is afraid of being accused of the harassment. At the end of the novel, she attempts to protect Minette because she genuinely respects her. In spite of Genna's efforts, Minette lapses into deep depression and eventually dies in a fire. Genna's role then is to unravel the mystery of her roommate's death.

In an interview, Oates spoke about Black Girl/White Girl as a metaphor for race in America. "'We are room-mates with one another,' she said, 'but how well do we know one another?'" [108] If Genna and Minette are metaphorical, then Oates' message is that liberal whites were not dealing with blacks honestly; instead they were compromising themselves and covering up black pathology in order to assuage white guilt. Oates is deliberately provocative with this intellectual exercise about America's racial dilemma. She seems to suggest that the Left is deluding itself and Oates seems to explore that nuance rather than oversimplify it.

Oates' fixation with violence is a symbol of eruption in the personality itself. She repeatedly uses concentrations of violence in her fiction in order to direct her reader's attention away from the externals of American society so as to denote crucial underlying surges in the psyche. She observes in a critical essay on Yeats, that his works were filled with a "violence (which) is the flooding of the ego by the fury of the veins, a sudden and irrevocable alliance with nature's chaos."[109] Such surges of rage or stark observations on the fact of violence dominate her stories.

As Hannah Arendt mentions, "Violence is by nature instrumental," [110] in Oates' novels, it becomes instrumental in bringing changes (for better or worse) in the character's lives. The social and psychological violence which she depicted in her fiction is the result of her obsession with other people's experience. The social violence which is so marked in her work is like the sheer density of detail – 'this and this is what is happening to people,' she seem to be saying. She is attached to life by well- founded apprehension that nothing lasts, nothing is safe, nothing is all around us. In them Maureen remarks:

> Maybe the book with her money in it, and the money so greedily saved, and the idea of the money, maybe these things weren't real either. What would happen if everything broke into pieces? It was queer how you felt, instinctively, that a certain space of time was really and not a dream, and you gave your life to it, all your energy and faith, believing it to be real. But how could you tell what would last and what wouldn't? Marriages ended. Love ended. Money could be stolen, found out and taken...or it might disappear by itself, like that secretary's notebook. Objects disappeared, slipped through cracks, devoured, kicked aside, knocked under the bed or into the trash, lost.

> Her clearest memory of the men she'd been with was their moving away from her. They were all body then, completed. [111]

She herself was probably always clear about her intentions, noting at one point that she was "not content with reporting events" but wished "to evoke their psychological reality for the reader, through the use of sensuous details and symbols."[112] Oates' characters are opaque, ungiving and uncharming. Society speaks in them, but they are not articulate. They are caught up in the social convulsion and move unheedingly, compulsively, blindly through the paces assigned to them by the power god. [113] This aspect is what Oates' work inherently expresses; a sense that American life is taking some of the people by the throat. Oates' America is of a surface which is broken through eruptions of passion and violence of unexpected dimensions.

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This chapter will dwell upon the concept of family as well as the painful adjustments that have been made by Oates' characters towards a changing world. Mediating as it does between the individual and society, the family is affected by historical change in a slow yet radical manner. Characters in Oates' fiction will understand family to refer to the traditional standard terms of a breadwinning father, nurturing mother, and siblings of assorted gender. However, a pattern that is frequently undermining the first has been observed. The father, and perhaps even the father's father, if the family is extended, may be brutal, weak, and financially inadequate or absent, whereas the mother or grandmother may provide inadequate or irrelevant care to the children. As the children approach adulthood they will energetically attempt to evade the roles that have been modeled by their parents' lives. However, Oates is not merely depicting dysfunctional families; rather, the dysfunctional relationships she presents, serve to question expectations about the operation of family structure.

Linda Mckie mentions that, "family have been described and explained as a social institution."[1] Idealized versions of family life are based on presumptions about knowing one's place:

> Rather than through mutually negotiated knowledge of each other.[2]

The term 'the family' generates thoughts and ideas that can be both comforting and disturbing. Families are collective forms of people and the relationships therein reflect material and social differences. These relationships and groupings play a critical role in the social and economic processes. Linda Mckie and L.Jamieson state that:

> Families and familial relationships are focal points for the transmission of knowledge and the formation of ideas on violence. [3]

The potential departure of an adult and parent from intimate and familial relationships leads to emotional, social and economic losses. Physical violence, and the broader processes of psychological violation and abuse, are social phenomena. Aiming to capture the multidimensional nature of violence, Ray proposes that:

> Violence refers to diverse behavioral forms and multiple levels of analysis. It may range from local and unregulated to orchestrated and controlled behavior. Violence breaks through moral prohibitions but may be legitimated with elaborate normative system. [4]

Alice Miller argues that:

> Violence actions of adults can always be traced to violence they suffered as children.[5]

However, contrary to this statement, in Oates' novels the perpetrators are unlikely to be abused in their childhood. There is no doubt that severe child abuse causes great psychological harm, which in some cases lead to violent behavior in adults. In many cases violent acts are committed by individuals who were not severely abused as children. Oates is inherently concerned with violence and agrees with Jung's conception of "the shadow" and Freud's conception of "the repressed feelings" which is inherent in all mankind. In explaining the presence of violence in human affairs, Hannah Arendt mentions:

> No one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for

> special consideration...violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all. [6]

Linda Mckie mentions that agencies and governments have acknowledged about violence which take place in families. However, all too often, violence in families is considered, or framed as, a 'misdemeanor' that takes place between adults at times of tension or stress.[7] In the family the young develop in a perverse relationship, wherein they learn to love the same person who beats and oppresses. The family therefore constitutes the first cell of the fascist society, and the love for oppressive figures will be carried on till they become adults. Kinship and family forms have often been thought to impact the social relations in the society as a whole, and therefore been described as the first cell or the building social unit of the structure of a society. [8] Deleuze and Guattari, in their analysis of the dynamics at work within a family:

> Track down all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives.[9]

Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault, as well as other philosophers and psychiatrists such as Laing and Reich, have explained that the patriarchal-family that was conceived in the Western traditional models serves the purpose of perpetuating a proletarian authoritarian society.[10] The child grows according to the oedipal model, which is typical of the structure of capitalist societies, and the child becomes in turn the owner of submissive children and protector of the woman.[11] Some psychiatrists argue that the family institution is in conflict with human nature and human primitive desires and that one of its core functions is in the performance of the suppression of instincts; a repression of desire commencing with the earliest age of the child. As the young undergoes physical and psychological repression from someone for whom one

develops love, a loving attitude towards authority figures is developed. The child will bring such attitude in the adult life, when one will desire social repression and will form docile subjects for society.[12] Likewise in Oates' texts, there are several characters who undergoes physical and psychological repression as a child. Richard Everett from Expensive People is one such example who undergoes psychological repression and, eventually he ended up killing his oppressor, which is, his mother Nada.

In Oates' fiction, the individual is always viewed in the perspective of the larger world – most often, in the perspective of culture and history. Oates is an American writer who is self-consciously exploring the American experience. In a 1973 Psychology Today essay, she states:

> All the books published under my name in the past 10 years have been formalized, complex propositions about the nature of personality and its relationship to a specific culture (contemporary America).[13]

Beneath her fiction's manifold and melodramatic surfaces, lies a vision of reality that may perhaps be best explored in the cultural context that Oates herself suggests and which her fiction and criticism confirm. This context is the pervasive idealism of American culture, the quintessentially American notion of freedom and self-sufficiency. There is a peculiar uniformity to the most interesting of the descriptions that have been offered of the American imagination as it is reflected in American literature. The emphasis is placed upon the individual who is negotiating the world in isolation and also upon the individual's refusal to accept the limits which are imposed by life in the world. D.H.Lawrence, for instance portrayed classic American literature as "begotten by the self, in the self, the self made love." American writers wanted "Paradise," but writes Lawrence, "There is no paradise" [14] (a phrase

that Max Meade, a character in Oates' Black Girl/ White Girl echoes). Mining these Lawrentian insights, Richard Poirier says of the protagonists in classic American literature:

> They tend to substitute themselves for the world.[15]

Similarly, Ihab Hassan has perhaps grasped the underlying motive of American aspirations in his statement:

> The anarchy of the American soul is nourished on an old dream: not freedom, not power, not even love, but the dream of immortality. The American has never really acknowledged Time.[16]

In the American landscape, as evoked by these descriptions, Oates stands as a unique and radical figure. She is a writer who is obsessed with experiential plurality, with human reciprocity and human limitations, and with reconciliation to time and the world manifested within. Characteristically, Oates' novels begin nearly as paradigms of American history. As America loosened its bonds from England, Oates' protagonists discover their own selves by a variety of routes that are free from the structures of family, place and history. Yet when they attempt to follow the imperatives of the self, they inevitably confront chaos, madness, or death. In the romance tradition of American fiction, many of Oates' characters strain to escape from the world in which they find themselves, but they are repeatedly defeated. The Falls for instance is a novel which is based partly on facts about the local "Love Canal" pollution scandal, and those who fought to expose it in during the 60s and 70s. It seeks to evoke a mythological battle between the will to self-annihilation and the impulse to conserve life. It is a novel about the crisis of family life which is threatened by "outside" forces. Ariah undergoes a series of experiences, each representing a period or aspect of American history

and culture, which cause her to withdraw further and further into herself in order to depend solely on the sufficiency of the self.

Oates' critics frequently insist that her fiction centers upon repetitive plots and central obsessions. She herself remarks:

> Everything is related. If it wouldn't alarm me, I'd someday go back through all my writing and note how the obsessions come and go horizontally (a single psychological 'plot' worked out in a story, a play, poems, parts of novels).[17]

That obsessive plot is the story of the American family, not its nostalgic resurrection but in its painful adjustments to a changing world. Despite the violent dislocations which her characters suffer, Oates places great emphasis upon family ties. The central character of her novels has grandparents and parents, brothers and sisters, spouses and children – or at least some of these. And although her protagonists, for one reason or another, often leave home, "home" – and all that a definite place in the world implies – remains a persistent concern of her fiction.[18]

In A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967), the novel covers forty years and three generations. The process of gender identification which is treated in Oates' family fiction will be best understood through the intersection of social and psychological theories. In the novel, Swan's murder of his ideological father is, as Marilyn C.Wesley suggests, "an emphatic gesture of the refusal of capitalistic interpretations of power."[19] However, in Swan's actions Oates seems to denote the outlines of a more familiar story: the Oedipus complex that Freud had defined as:

> An emotional attachment of the child to the parent of the opposite sex accompanied by an attitude of rivalry to the parent of the same sex. [20]

Swan murders his father, and, he is evidently attracted to his mother. [21] When Swan is ten years old, Clara takes him to visit some of Revere's relatives. The boring hours of dining and visiting are relieved for the boy by significant moments of confusing intimacy with his mother. While she showers, Swan waits on her bed imagining what life would be like for the two of them if they did not return to Revere's home:

> Clara came out barefoot, smoothing her slip over her thighs. She wore a black slip. Swan watched her and felt something warm in his blood like shells that seemed hard but became transparent and then dissolved away. [22]

The next afternoon, Swan and Clara visit a museum where they meet a man with whom they had dined on the previous evening. On the following day, Clara drops Swan off at the library where he waits for her for hours. Suspecting an assignation, he angrily whispers, "That bitch," under his breath. Years later, just before the murder-suicide at the conclusion of the book, Swan feels he must confess to his lover, Deborah that he once called his mother an ugly name. Freud mentions the compelling drama of the oedipal situation:

> I have found, in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father, and I now regard it as a universal event of early childhood...If that is so, we can understand the riveting power of *Oedipus Rex*... Each member of the audience was once, in germ and phantasy, just such an Oedipus, and each one recoils in horror from the dream-fulfillment here transplanted in reality, with the whole quota of repression which separates his infantile state from his previous one. [23]

Swan's story does not depict the depravity to which there could be a regression. In fact, it is not primarily his sexual attraction to his mother, which is minimized in the novel, nor the murder of his father. Swan needs to create through definitive gestures as to what his confession has failed to elicit – namely a moral meaning rather than economic blankness. Swan's plight demonstrates that oedipal relations in Oates' fiction must be read in order to indicate both a cultural predicament as well as personal problem. As Juliet Mitchell observes:

> Oedipus complex is not a set of attitudes to other people, but a pattern of relationships between a set of places. [24]

According to Juliet Mitchell, the Freudian theory which describes the genesis of gender arrangements have been instituted through the oedipal transition, and, provided with this description, the stability to the required need must therefore be examined:

> I want to propose that with the dissolution of the Oedipus complex man enters finally into his humanity (always a precarious business). But it seems that the definition of that humanity – the differentiating instance between man and beast, i.e. the development to exchange relationships, may have become 'unsuitable' for the particular form in which it is today expressed. Freud having shown us the heritage that we have access to only unconsciously, the next stage may be to see the importance of the contradictions between this heritage and the present way in which it is contained in the socially and ideologically reconstructed family. [25]

Oates' narratives of the oedipal conflict between sons and daughters demonstrate the unsuitability of the present-day family gender arrangements by promoting the examination of 'contradictions.' There is no doubt that Oates places her transgressive heroes and heroines as

confused, resistant and right in the middle of an oedipal crisis. This is observed in the characters' general refusal to the usual dissolution of the complex through identification that is in terms of conformity to the normative innocence or violence of the same-sex parents. Constituted ideologically at birth as "boys" and "girls," their characteristic refusals demonstrate that the characters wish to evade the next step, which is the restrictive constitution as men and women. However, this tendency cannot be dismissed as a nostalgic desire to return to childhood. Denied regression and averse to progression, Oates' youthful characters often avail themselves of transgression. The only actual instance of parent-child incest occurring in Oates' works has been treated as an illustration of depravity rather than an opportunity to explore what Marilyn C. Wesley calls "transgressive interrogation." When Bert, the father of young Clara's best friend Rosalie is dragged out of his migrant worker's shack and murdered for sexually molesting his daughter:

> They were beating Rosalie's father...she could hear the whacks of the blows.[26]

The witnessing Walpoles are terrified by the violent display of crude social force, but are in accord with the principle of justice that determined Bert's fate. Finally, when Oates does make use of incestuous material, there is always a mediating intervention to ensure its status as symbolic rather than actual. Themes of the unfulfilled 'romantic' love of sons for their mothers are marked by tones of authorial derision, while the incestuous liaisons of the daughters always occur with figurative rather than biological fathers.

The first part of A Garden of Earthly Delights concentrates upon the fatalism of Depression and the erosion of Carleton's manhood from his family prosperity to frustrated feeling. Victimized not just by economic repression but by an accompanying "restless

boredom," he turns to violence as his most immediate means of self-assertion. His own life subsides into a final meaningless death when Clara, his favorite daughter, runs away. Carleton's deep-seated frustrations are evoked through the grim squalor and manifestation of angry violence which dominate the first part of the novel. However, Oates' main concentration lies not just in chronicling a family history set against the Depression and the war. The social and economic facts swirl around confusedly, often contradictorily and never analyzable in a systematic way while reflecting how they are puzzlingly apprehended by the characters themselves. What matters more than the dimly understood economic and social forces of Carleton's world are the forces that lie beneath: namely, the intimacy of family ties. Oates carefully distinguishes between the impersonal pattern of public history and the less ordered and a more intense surges of private or personal history, a mixture of desire and memory and instinctive ties as well as conscious obsessions. Although the book's action covers forty years and three generations, the psychic realities cannot be computed by historical time: the lack of psychological roots and the identification of personal fulfillment with material security remain fearfully unchanged throughout Clara's life right from her bewildered girlhood upto her final lonely madness.

Jules Wendall of them is sensitive enough to discern his family's deficient power. He is particularly aware of his father's ineffectual submissiveness:

> He tried to think of his father as a soldier, but he kept seeing a slack-bellied man in the front room drinking beer, waiting. What had his father been waiting for? His father hadn't even played with the deck of cards, as Loretta and Jules did. What was being played out for him, which cards were being turned over, he hadn't even interest to find out – it was being done for him, no matter. And so his father had waited.[27]

Acutely conscious of his family's pervasive helplessness, young Jules intuits his destiny: "Someday I will change all this, he thought with a flash of joy."[28]

One evening while he is crossing a busy Detroit street, Jules is almost run over by a speeding car. Still reeling from this near-miss, he is then jostled roughly by a passing pedestrian. Faye, a beautiful stranger who has witnessed these events, summons a cab and takes Jules back to her apartment to make him her lover. Described as "a northern…fairy-tale princess…cold, enchanting,"[29] Faye represents freedom from commitment to other people. However, just as the recognition of Jules's worthiness is not, in this instance, based on the hero's excellence, the value of the magic knowledge the donor imparts is also questionable. As a result of his relationship with Faye, Jules discovers that:

> His freedom was important…Every thought dragged him back to that mess of a family but technically he was free. "I think that if I could get enough money to fix them all up," he told Faye, "to get some good doctor for my sister, then…I guess I'd take off foe California and see what's out there." "There's nothing out there," Faye said, yawning.[30]

If Faye's ennui here raises doubts about the value of personal independence for the American hero, Jules's experience of Bernard Geffen disputes the value of what the second donor appears to promise: the American "adventure"[31] of financial success. Whereas Faye is coolly detached, Bernard with his flurry of checks and bills, his conversation about yachts and "connections"[32] is wildly manic. The three days Jules is in his employ are crammed with fast cars, fast talk, and fast deals: "Drive straight ahead," Bernard orders, "I want to think. I have to plan the rest of my life this morning," and Jules learns from Geffen's example that he, too, may have the fabulous ability to "make nearly anything happen."[33] Bernard embodies for

Jules all the money-driven possibility of the American dream, but his violent death – "his throat freshly slit and the butcher knife placed in his hand"[34]- reveals the American nightmare. With $10,000 which Bernard had issued him for the purchase of a new Cadillac in hand, Jules feels as if he "had become immortal," but the shocking realization of mortality, "the rumpled, soft, filthy feel of bills," dominates as Jules, terror-stricken at the sight of Bernard's blood, hastily stuffs the wads of money into the pockets of his murdered employer's coat.[35]

Like every traditional questing hero, Jules seeks a site where reparation is possible. His journey takes him through the legendary Southwest as far as Texas, but his "faith in the future" and an "ideal landscape," which is a "wilderness," is tested by the actual scenery:

> Beaumont, Texas. No mountains, no beauty…The spread of land from Detroit to Beaumont was similar in the cities and the country.[36]

As he and his girlfriend Nadine drive down a road that winds past oil refineries and tar-paper shanties to end up at the city dump, her comment summarizes their disappointed reaction: "This is a place to die in."[37] Jules has to go home to Detroit to finally confront the villain of the piece.

Before he was sixteen years old, Jules had been accosted by a policeman who put his pistol to the boy's temple and pulled the trigger. Finding the clip empty, the cop cracked the gun butt across Jules' skull, and, stooping to lift Jules's wallet, he had left him unconscious in a vacant building. Significantly, Jules's vicious father, Howard Wendall, had been a cop. The police in <u>them</u> are not representatives of social order; they stand, instead, for violent paternal abuse of power as the definitive condition of urban life. When Jules is caught up in the Detroit riot that serves as the climax of the novel, he finds himself once again in an empty

building with a brutal policeman. This time, however, it is Jules who pulls the trigger and murders the cop. In the denouement that follows this questionable conquest, Jules tastes the traditional reward of the fairy-tale hero. The community honors him: in the aftermath of the riot Jules appears on television as an authority that is able to interpret the destructive turmoil, and, funded by a federal poverty grant, he sets off once again, with renewed optimism, to seek his fortune, in California, the one "wilderness" that he is yet to use up. He even plans to find and wed Nadine Greene, the elusive princess of the story.

Freud in his work The Interpretation of Dreams (1965) mentions that when the young boy reaches his oedipal crisis he must relinquish his close attachment to his mother in order to assume the privileged power of his father's situation. According to Freud, the young boy experiences intense antagonism towards his father, because the father has sexual possession of the mother.[38] The Oedipus complex is overcome when the child represses both his erotic attachments to his mother and his antagonism towards his father. This marks a major stage in the development of an autonomous self, because the child has detached himself from his early dependence on his parents, particularly his mother. The Oedipal theme of them represent the desire for human connection, sympathetic understanding, which is imaginable as the nurturing connection to an idealized mother but impossible in the adult gender structure that decrees that in order for a boy to become a man he must "smash" the only nurturance that he has encountered, (however imperfectly), in order to enter a position of power which is predominantly supported by violence. Jules Wendall grows up in poverty and does not associate complete gratification of any kind with his own family. His dreams of satiation consequently attach themselves to Nadine Green, who represents wealth to him. When Jules drives his gangster mentor Bernard Geffen out of the slums of Detroit down Lakeshore Drive into the wealthy suburb of Grosse Pointe, the linguistic from within the text, reveals that he has fallen in love with the neighborhood:

> A world of foliage and dark red brick...such sights went to his head.[39]

And he:

> Felt his heart swell with...something intangible and lovely...not just connected with money, but...its mysterious essence. [40]

When Jules encounters Bernard's sixteen-year-old niece, she becomes the embodiment, and the focus of his true "love at first sight," and from that moment onward Jules devotes himself to serving the dream of fulfillment which she symbolizes. His characteristic form of expression remains in kissing Nadine's hand. When she tells him that she would like to run away to Mexico or to the Southwest, he takes her. When they are on the road and she says that she is hungry or that she wants to wash her hair, he gets her food or shampoo, all this, even if he has to 'mug' someone in a restroom or break into a house in order to get the money to pay for it. He feels as if everything is "under an enchantment" whereas unsentimental Nadine Greene, the object of his stylized affection wonders:

> Why is it always love, love, love? I never heard of anyone who talked about love so much, outside of books. [41]

However, Jules's dream ends not in satisfaction but in frustration. When he falls ill in Texas, Nadine, no more capable of accommodating the fleshly needs of illness than she was of serving those of passion, simply abandons him. Years later, when he encounters her again, the two begin an actual affair, but despite their lovemaking, Nadine remains technically frigid:

> He believed that she felt what he felt – locked in a desire for fusion, unity, but turned back rudely, baffled. [42]

According to Marilyn C. Wesley the physical disunion of Jules and Nadine indicates:

> The son's central problem: inevitable emotional isolation, extending from maternal to social relations. The fact of absolute separation is the most important shared feature of the three courtly narratives, each of which is motivated by the son's overriding need for connection. [43]

Musing about his obsessive love for her, Jules discovers its source in his own desire for the maternal:

> Sympathy women drew up from the deepest most private parts of their beings." It is this capacity for, "impersonal, blind compassion, almost a yearning for physical union, that he felt in Nadine though she hadn't the body of a mother or a sister but the body of a stranger.[44]

In Oates' fiction, this "sympathy" is the ideal quality of the mother, and it stands opposite the father's overarching power.

Not only has Jules's story generated "a surprising range of critical reaction," according to Linda Wagner, but provoked by what she perceived as gross misreading of them in reviews of the novel, Oates herself defended Jules against:

> Well-educated, liberal, handsomely-paid New York" critics too insulated from "poverty in America" to appreciate the "marvelous" accomplishment of "my young hero.[45]

Although Oates declared that the novel's conclusion hints that Jules is "on his way to some sort of American success," she qualified that assertion:

> In them, I saw Jules as a kind of American success in an ironic sense, of course. He is a hero and a murderer at once. I think that is ironic. I hope it is.[46]

The irony which is claimed by Oates is supported by her satiric treatment of the generic requirements of the romance. Jules, who is an energetic brother figure, is physically and morally equipped to be a hero. He desperately wants to be a hero and he valiantly tries to be a hero; but each of the narrative criteria of heroism is undercut by the conditions of the world in which his story is told:

> He thought of the life he would break into when he got out of school and was on his own, finally, a man, leading a life that involved raising his family and then getting out from under them. First he would raise them to be like other people. Then he would get out from under them. *I will change my life in the end*, he thought. [47]

Even Jules understands his act of murder as moral capitulation. He has spent his childhood in a successful attempt to evade the petty but violent rage that characterizes and is inherent of his father, Howard Wendall. On the occasion of Howard's death, Jules observes his own special triumph:

> Jules felt a flash of satisfaction, almost of joy. No, he hadn't killed his father. His own anger had been kept back for years, kept successfully back; he hadn't hurt anyone…He felt that his father's essence, that muttering dark anger, had

> surrounded him and almost penetrated him, but had not quiet penetrated him; he was free.[48]

In Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence, Rollo May describes the struggle for power as a natural assertion of significance that may escalate to its extreme form of violence when all other means have been thwarted.[49] The sons in Oates' working class families illustrate the positive impulse to achieve personal agency, but the fathers exhibit the frustration of that impulse, which results in violence. As economic circumstance affect the father, strategies of empowerment becomes ineffectual and frustrating, and it results in a personal, familial, and social life which is marked by violent expressions of the maladaptive "anger' Jules describes as the principal characteristic of Howard Wendall:

> Yes, anger was at the core of him; his soul was anger, made up of anger. Anger for what? For nothing, for himself, for life, for the assembly line, for the cockroaches, for the dripping toilet…Anger. No money. Where had the money gone? Where would the money come from? Anger, money. His father.[50]

Anger, money, father. These are the terms that mark the boundaries of the son's territory in Oates' fiction. The dangerous region entered by the boys in her works is the adult world of American capitalism. It is a competitive arena in which the working-class fathers inevitably lose. Nevertheless, young Jules Wendall imagines his special destiny in images of financial success:

> He felt his true essence was of great value and would someday be expressed in ordinary signs of cars and women.[51]

His story, however, disputes the ideological basis for such dreams.

Parody, Oates explains, is "the playing of forms out of which life has disappeared"[52] Through Jules's story, them presents an elaborate parody of the forms of American heroes namely independence, aggression, and greed, that promote economic competition as indispensable for positive achievement. The multiple caricatures that contribute to Jules's story cooperate in an elaborate critique of the quintessential American hero as defined by R.W.B.Lewis in terms of the American Adam; "a hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited." "Emancipated from history" and "untouched and undefiled" by "family," while trying to fulfill his destiny as an American hero, Jules discovers he is much too alone. "I have come to the conclusion," Jules writes to Loretta and Maureen from Dallas, "that people are all lonely, each one of us."[53] In these statements Jules shifts from the concern for personal power which is sought by the romantic hero that Oates considers maladaptive to the kind of productive power which Rollo May classifies as *nutrient*: power *for* rather than *against* the other. [54] As she observed to Dale Boesky:

> In them I deal in utter seriousness with the possibility of the transformation of our culture by eastern religion – at least the 'mysticism' of the Indian saint who teaches, contrary to what America teaches Maureen and Jules, that, 'we are all members of a single family.[55]

Fredric Jameson provides a convenient means of conceptualizing Oates' varied presentations of family relations as interrogation of traditional ideology. According to Jameson, all forms of power and status are "based ultimately on gender hierarchy and on the

building block of the family unit."[56] To consider the institution of the family, therefore, is to raise issues of both class and gender. To read Oates' literature in this way is to trace resistance as a structural imperative, a response to the ideological limits that shape it, and to comprehend the energy of her literary production as reflective of the intensity of the problem of family, gender, and power which it addresses. In Oates' work, the negation of power is impotence and the negation of nurturance is the inability to connect with others in an intimate relationship. Since the disjuncture of power and nurturance is defined as family structure and experienced as family relationship, the secondary terms may also be personified by family members. Just as the father is allied with power, his negation namely the family member who is supposed to be most unlike him – the daughter – embodies powerlessness. Similarly the son who is most unlike the mother, is defined by isolation, the negation of nurturance. In A Garden of Earthly Delights, Swan has reached the stage of oedipal transition. He is angry and confused and as he is excluded from maternal attachment, he is, consequently, "isolated." Swan sees nothing ahead in life except a struggle with Revere's surviving legitimate sons. The only way out of it, he thinks, is death or madness. He hates his mother's materialistic values and wants, "nothing so much as to destroy" not just all that Clara has won for him but "everything, the entire world." [57]

Expensive People is a novel in that American novelistic tradition of family violence in which one family member murders another oppressing family member. Richard "the child murderer" yearns for his mother. The mother, in this case is Nada who imposes impossible goals upon her son, but her underlying purpose is not his complete dependence and submission. Rather, she wants him to be totally free so that she, in turn, can be totally free from him. Conversely, Richard does not want freedom from Nada. Indeed, his greatest fear is that she will abandon him:

> I wanted to crawl out of bed and press my aching eyes against Nada's ankles, kiss her feet, her shoes, her stockings, and beg her not to leave. Oh don't leave! Not again! [58]

Instead of killing his father, Richard killed his mother in order to establish an irrevocable relationship between them namely that of killer and victim. In Oates' suburban paradise, human associations are so elusive, so slippery - even that between mother and son – that, only murder guarantees their stability. At the beginning of the story, when the eleven-year-old Richard moves with his parents to the suburb of Fernwood, he is a sickly, paranoid, emotionally starved child whose obsession with his parents – especially his mother, Nada – has become all-consuming. Feeling unloved by his philistine father and his unstable, selfish mother, Richard lives in watchfulness and fear. He has abandoned all hope of receiving emotional nurture from Nada (whose name suggests that she has nothing to give[59]) and thus assumes a purely defensive posture, hoping to forestall being abandoned entirely – abandonment over which he has good reason to fear, since she has left her husband and son twice previously. Richard's constant, debilitating anxiety arises from his deeply conflicted feelings, his simultaneously resenting of Nada and craving for her affection:

> Yes, I loved (my parents), I love her especially. It was awful.[60]

Greg Johnson proposes that:

> As a family unit the Everetts are the dark side of the American ideal; bound together by money rather than love, by appearances concealing an emotional void, they are psychological grotesques. [61]

The thick-skinned, vulgar Elwood Everett is a caricature of the successful corporate executive, his genial outward demeanor barely concealed his primitive drive to compete and destroy. His emotional life, such as it is, centers upon:

> His extravagant, stupid love for Nada. [62]

Rather than murdering the intrusive father, like Oedipus, Richard attempts to kill off Nada's fragmentary selves to fix her in the single role of mother:

> I don't want to be called *Mother*," she explains "No *Mother* no *Son*.[63]

Richard's murder of his mother is the induction to the violent order that empowers the unknown figure (Richard was unsure if Elwood was his real father till the killing of his mother) who definitely emerges only after the death of Nada:

> I've had enough of this lousy American father bit! I've had enough of smiling and gritting my teeth and taking it in the guts...and from now on things are going to be different...*Father* you are going to respect, buster, or get the hell out. [64]

Richard's actions are a response to a social situation that has been dominated by relations of power rather than relations of nurturance. Richard's oedipal transgression and the courtly attachment to his mother, is understandable as a pathetic attempt to retain the possibility of love in a culture that denies it, but, Richard's aspiration of service to his mother represents a sentimentalized yearning for the fully satisfying bond with the mother that never actually existed in pre oedipal experience[65] Richard's murder of his dream-mother signals his acquiescence to the definitive violence that support the "Father" as defined by Elwood's

metamorphosis, but Richard's entrance into the masculine system that produces the father has also apparently killed off the possibility of love.

In Expensive People matricide becomes the solution for the child-hero, Richard. This is in response to his mother's narcissistic assertion of freedom that denies him her love and recognition. The novel begins with a confession of violence. Its narrator, eighteen-year-old Richard Everett, announces that he is a child murderer. He is not someone who has murdered a child (his parents have in effect accomplished that) but a child who has committed murder. Richard is trying to re-create the person whom he thinks he has destroyed as well as seeking to order and control his life in the past as well as the present. His mother had also tried to do the latter. Nada Everett's stories about childhood are analogues of her attempt to create a coherent, self-determined personal history through possessions and social status. Like Richard's memoir, they may or may not be "true." Richard's world is that of upper middle-class suburbia, a "domestic American darkness"[66] in which parents are their children's "molesters" and expend souls in expending money. Richard says at one point that "Fernwood is Paradise"[67], adding that "it means nothing"[68]. It is a spiritual hell which is tolerable only if one maintains the illusion that possessions are all. To give up the illusion would mean "the end of western civilization!"[69]; it would also mean the end of a world which is dominated by women. At the library, one of Nada's friends peruses a book called The Care and Feeding of the Middle-Aged American Male. At a beauty parlor, Richard sees in Vogue pictures of women who have assumed male roles. At his office, Richard's father has power; at home he is nothing, except for an occasional rebellion against the "'lousy American father bit'"[70]Everett accepts his emasculation. Victimized by his "extravagant…love for Nada" as the void of her name suggests, he and his male counterparts assert their will to power in their interchangeable executive jobs as well as in the ownership of their interchangeable houses and in driving their interchangeable cars, but never as husbands and fathers. Richard

sometimes doubts that Everett is his parent and longs to hear the "strong, hard, even brutal voice of my true father"[71]. Nada, therefore, cherishes her material Eden yet periodically seeks the excitement of the road. She openly disavows her maternal responsibility to Richard in a passionate speech on freedom, triggered by Richard calling her "mother" instead of the usual "Nada":

> I don't particularly care to be called Mother by anyone. I don't respond to it: I'm trying to hold my own and that's it. No depending on anyone else. I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it.[72]

Nada is, in fact the child of immigrant parents. She has vowed to create herself anew as part of a "world that owns everything and controls everything"[73], thereby escaping from history into a realm of expensive things which "seemed emanations of a higher existence"[74]. However, the realm proves to be a trap as she herself is both a personification of its emptiness and sometimes a rebel against it. She is a woman alternating between greedy acquisition and flights to strange lovers in strange and distant cities. Her husband is at once her liberator and her jailer, her son is at once a creature to be shaped in her image of perfection and an obstacle for her freedom. Richard, bright as he is, can never be as bright as she wants him to be; loving as he is, he cannot stop her from leaving him. Only when the real Nada is dead can he imaginatively engender a mother who is tamed by his "power and love." Approaching the end of his own fiction, Richard comments:

> Whatever I did, whatever degradations and evils, stupidities, blunders, moronic intrusions, whatever single ghastly act I did manage to achieve, it was done out of freedom, out of choice. This is the only consolation I have in the

> face of death, my readers: the thought of my free will. But I must confess that there are moments when I doubt even this consolation…[75]

Here, he is echoing or, since Oates clearly has the parallel in mind, parodying Satre. The freedom of choice Nada acts upon to achieve her authenticity as an artist is, as Alice Martin has argued, related to Satre's Nausea.[76] Richard includes in one of his imagined reviews the remark that "Everett sets out to prove that he can out-smart Satre but does not quiet make it."[77] Richard's rebellions against his school, his mother's art, and her chaotic and hypocritical life, are all attempts at authentic acts, culminating in his purchase of the rifle and the willed violence he perpetrates. His actions bring about a strange, frenzied joy, a sense of coming alive which makes him feel isolated yet free, lonely yet authentic. Earlier Richard had realized that when his parents':

> Stage props were ripped away; they always showed that they needed no fresh reason to hate. They simply hated.[78]

Similarly he has deliberately chosen to break through the factitious world that surrounds him. Violence has become an affirmation of his freedom. And yet, while the murder of his mother is a free, liberating act, once it is completed, there is no rapturous discovery, His confession is not believed and the surfaces of suburbia close over the deed. He is denied the world's recognition of his terrible freedom and thus his fiction making becomes a failure.

Oates' works explore relations of power, and these concern a daughter or a son or both. There are also notable evolutions of the sons' refusal to identify themselves with the practice of power as defined by the fathers. In A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) the problem of power results in the son's murder of the father. In them (1969) too, the son murders a symbolic father. These acts of violence indicate rejection of fathers, albeit by

employing the fathers' mode of authority that destroys them as well. The problem of the son in Oates' works is that he must become an adult male and subsequently he will assume the potentialities and the liabilities of the fathers' culturally encoded positions. Jules and Swan of them and A Garden of Earthly Delights respectively interject the defensive rage of their own actual fathers and adopt the means of empowerment modeled by the ideological fathers. Jules of them solved the problem of his 'father empowerment' through recourse to violence; Swan of A Garden of Earthly Delights resolves his confusion of family power through the murder of his ideological father and his own suicide. When teenager Loretta allows Bernie Malin to share her bed, he is murdered before dawn by her brother Brock, and in the morning policeman, Howard Wendall comes to her rescue, for a price – namely, sexual intercourse. Thus two possible fathers for the child who is born nine months later make Jules' paternity questionable. Although Loretta marries Howard and the baby is raised as his son, she hints frequently at the deep mystery of Jules' identity:

> …yet there was something strangely tender about him, [79]

and the possibility of alternative fathers provides Jules with antithetical definitions of power.

Like Jules' story, A Garden of Earthly Delights is a novel which is suspended between two figures of the father. Carleton, with whom the story begins, is an extreme example of the lower-class father. An itinerant fruit picker, he has no property and, as a result, no control over the conditions of his work. This lack of control is symbolized by the shifting locations of his labor, and, his perpetual dislocation of place is symbolic of a profound dislocation of spirit. Carleton represents the paternal style of submission to economic authority. When he resorts to violence it is as a response to forces that he does not understand. When he kills his best friend Rafe in a bar room brawl, he is as much victim as

well as an agent of the contingent violence that defines him. The figure of Curt Revere, Carleton's opposite dominates the last section of the novel. Revere is the head of a rural empire and he owns gypsum mines, farm land, a factory, and a lumber yard. More importantly, (as his adopted son Swan understands), he is the inherent power that such ownership confers. For Revere, violence is both a metaphor and a means of his characteristic control. He is the kind of man to whom a gun is a:

> Natural…extension of his hand or fist.[80]

Other important characters in the novel – Lowry, Clara, and Swan – exist in relation to these extreme positions. Lowry, who is another of Oates' symbolic older brothers, rescues Clara when she runs away from her father, Carleton, to protect her own limited autonomy, but although he eventually becomes Clara's lover and the biological father of her child, the bond between them remains tenuous. Like Carleton, Lowry is a traveler. As he confesses to Clara, (like her), he grew up in a sort of migrant farm family. But unlike Carleton, Lowry tries to control his own life. A rum runner in the early part of the story, he actually drives, and is not driven like Carleton, and he also attempts to take charge of his life through comprehending it:

> I'd like to have everything I owned in one bag and take it with me. I don't want things to tie me down. If I owned lots of things – like my father did – then they'd get in the way and I wouldn't see clearly. Once you own things you have to be afraid of them. Of losing them. [81]

Lowry seeks control through education. He counsels Clara to learn to read in order to achieve the power which her own family lacked. However, since Clara is Lowry's sister in her similar deficiency of knowledge, he cannot make her his wife. Instead, he marries a "teacher" who he had hoped would help him clarify his thoughts.

The section of the novel that bears Lowry's name is situated symbolically between the stories of Carleton and Revere. And Clara, whose story runs throughout the novel, also occupies the symbolic space between the impotence of Carleton and the power of Revere even though, at sixteen, she believes that she "took her life into control." [82] Abandoned by the unreliable Lowry and pregnant with his child, Clara begins a relationship with the stable Revere. He assumes that her son, whom is nicknamed Swan by her, is his own child, and he provides for both of them until the death of his first wife in Swan's sixth year. On the day of her wedding when Swan exhibits his fear of his "new father" and his apprehension about his three new brothers, Clara predicts:

> You're going to take everything away from them someday and kick them out of this house…Someday you'll get back at him – you'll be his best son.[83]

Swan, who loves his mother, unquestioningly accepts her charge. Intelligent and intuitive, his first step is to assess the power relationships within his family. Revere has a clear and devastating effect upon his mother; in Swan's eyes he is, therefore, omnipotent. By the time he is a young man Swan acknowledges his own desperation for power and all he has to do to get it, is to be his 'father's son'. However, that is precisely the problem. Like the other key characters in the novel, Clara's son is also suspended between two fathers. His two different names signify that suspension in terms of his public identity as Steven Revere is contradicted by his "real name," Swan Walpole. In contrast to Jules in <u>them</u>, Swan lives with Revere, his ideological father, whom he expects to emulate, but it is his actual father, Lowry, whom he encounters only once, who continues to haunt his destiny. Like Jules, who tried and failed to escape sharing Howard's deadly anger, Swan tries, yet fails, to avoid the consequences of his actual father's prediction. However his attempt to assume his position as the son of his

ideological father first involves the boy in a hunting accident that kills his brother, and finally results in Swan's murder of Revere and his own suicide.

When Swan is ten years old he is subjected to pressure that originates with Revere: "he will hunt and he will like it." When Swan goes hunting with his thirteen-year-old brother Robert, the masculine game turns more serious. Swan strikes his brother in anger as they are crossing a pasture and Robert's gun gets entangled in a barbed wire fence, discharging to wound him fatally, and in spite of the pressure and the accidental circumstances, Swan is never able to fully disclaim moral culpability for his brother's death. Revere's connection with all his sons is so inherently cold and domineering that the entire family looks to Clara in order to intervene with him on all domestic issues, but, for young Swan, Revere's distant paternal style exceeds the merely personal. When Revere reads to his family of the stark tales of the Old Testament, Swan sees "in his father's blunt graying head a shadow of God himself."[84] Swan's murder of his ideological father is no accident; it can be read as the symbolic rejection of the violent and exploitative power that Revere represents. Swan's suicide also becomes the hopeless realization of himself as the weaker one. After the murder-suicide at the climax of the novel, Clara lives out the remainder of her long life in a dazed condition. Clara's great comfort in the familiarity of these themes indicates that the world of competitive and commercial violence is the meaning which is vested at the core of the life of the Revere family; the ultimate meaning of "all" that Swan "had inherited," then, is what Lowry had predicted for him and it indicated a heritage of things to be killed and walked over. Swan's murder of his father and his destruction of the son which is deliberately created in that father's image must be understood as more than the insane resolution of his personal mistreatment by an ambitious mother. Rather, it becomes the violent refusal of a crude capitalistic male ideology of unmitigated power. Oates' father-son novels treat the morality of power relations. Violent, distant, ruthless, incorporative, and controlling – the fathers

themselves represent deployment of power that the narratives first try to destroy and finally attempt to reform. A Garden of Earthly Delights thus seeks to resolve the capitalistic violence of the father through yet another act of violence.

The self and the world is the major theme in Black Girl / White Girl. Minette Swift had been a fiercely individualistic scholarship student. She possessed an assertive and even disturbed personality, and was one of the few black girls at Schuyler College. She was a self-effacing teenager from a privileged upper-class home, self-consciously struggling to make amends for her own elite upbringing. Partway through their freshman year, Minette suddenly becomes a victim to an increasing torrent of racist harassment and vicious slander — from within the apparent safety of their tolerant, "enlightened" campus:

> Girls passing by glace at her: a stout black girl with an oily-dark skin, pink schoolgirl glasses. Minette takes up the sidewalk, seemingly unaware.[85]

Minette suffers from a distorted sense of self and presumes the absolute primacy of self. Her refusal to acknowledge the world leads her to opposite routes of narcissism and nihilism. In the text, she swells with a sense of entitlement. As the daughter of a powerful and charismatic minister from Washington, D.C., she feels morally, spiritually and intellectually superior to her classmates. This makes her roundly unpopular with blacks and whites alike. Minette misses home desperately, and is very attached to her family so much so that, she receives phone calls from her mother everyday. In contrast, Genna, her roommate, avoids her ‘hippie’ mother's phone calls while yearning for a visit from her absentee father, activist lawyer Max Meade:

> Minette Swift called home often, Generva Meade called home rarely. [86]

There is no reason for Genna to call home because often when she called "no one answered." Her brother Rickie had left home and has been independent from his family since then and, her father, Max Meade is away most of the time. However, the novel is framed by Genna's relationship with her father Max Meade, a fiercely leftist civil rights lawyer. Max takes pride in the fact that his opponents cannot touch him because he takes pains not to violate any law. It is a stance that is endangered due to his relationship with a Weather Underground-type terrorist. Genna and Max Meade shared a close father-daughter bond and even though he is away from home most of the time, Max Meade sees to it that he speaks to his daughter whenever he is "safe":

> Unknowingly I called him "Daddy" when we spoke on the phone. This child's name for a father I had long outgrown as (I'd thought) I had long outgrown "Mommy…Max had called to speak with both his daughter and his wife, but it seemed to me that he had more to say to his daughter. [87]

With some subtlety, Oates uncovers the fault lines in Genna's sense of herself and her family background, particularly with her mother who is sympathetic to, but distanced from her husband's more extreme stances. Despite their differences, the girls muster an effortful friendship. When racist incidents begin to plague Minette, Genna tries to protect her:

> I had shielded Minette from the racist drawing…above all I had not wanted Minette to know. I did not want her to be hurt. I did not want her to recoil in anger, disgust. I did not want her to think *white racism*. [88]

However, Minette lapses into an antisocial, dangerous depression. Meanwhile, Genna has her own problems and she is gradually piecing together clues to a mystery whose solution may

lie far too close to home for comfort. Eventually, Minette's downward spiral prompts a shocking epiphany for Genna that alters the course of her family's life. Genna exclaims:

> If I could know a single other person, in a way that I had come to understand I could never know my father, my mother, my brother Rickie from whom we were estranged…[89]

In the last page of them, Maureen explains to Jules that despite her great affection she requires entire separation from him in the future:

> You were a wonderful brother to me, and I love you…but I want it over with. [90]

This is certainly the case of Genna and Rickie in Black Girl/White Girl. Much of Rickie's attraction for Genna is a shared childhood; namely that of being a protective big brother, however, they both have to part in order to develop. Genna adored her big brother, but, over the years her feelings for him evaded and her "…old love for Rickie…had evaded from her memory" [91] and she resented the fact that he called her at Haven House. The siblings were reunited after a long time but they have nothing much to talk about besides their father who was a joke for Rickie. However, a curtly brief letter which Genna receives from Rickie after his visit seems fated for their separation:

> Why don't you simply forget, Genna…I think that is the wisest strategy for both of us as children of M.M. Thank you.[92]

Whatever the exigencies of plot, the brothers and sisters of Oates' family fiction are, it would seem, fated to separation.

Born into ideological configurations which are predetermined by gender, Oates' sons and daughters in the fiction experience parents (or parent objects) and the fantasies that those figures generate in the paradoxical struggle to both attain and elude adulthood. Nancy Chodorow, who is also influenced by object-relations theory, argues that it is the differing relations with mothers and fathers that affect the gender contents of boys and girls. [93] The mother's role as primary caretaker creates for the boy the distance that facilitates identification with the cultural definitions of masculinity that Oates treats in her stories of sons, whereas the girl's continuing attachment to the mother as the central figure in their lives encourages the problem of separation and individualization. As a result, the father is cast for the daughter in Juliet Mitchell's term:

> The position of the third term that must break the asocial dyadic unit of mother and child. [94]

In Black Girl/ White Girl, Genna attempts to define herself in opposition to her 'hippie' mother by developing a strong attachment to her father:

> There was a mystery here. And always, with Max Meade there was romance. [95]

Genna's relationship with her mother is so estranged that she deliberately seeks a transgressive relationship with her father. Thanksgiving at Chadds Ford becomes more intolerable for Genna as:

> Veronica was distracted, glancing out of the windows, waiting for the phone to ring. [96]

The mother-daughter relationship is so inherently tense and awkward that Genna chose to return to Schuyler College two days early from her house in order to escape the 'polluted air' of Veronica Meade. For Genna, Max Meade is the symbol of everything good in her life. Genna signals her resistance to the condition of that necessity which is the formal imposition of impotence as the feminine situation.

In The Political Unconscious, Jameson states that, "the brothers, excluded from nurturance, and the sister, excluded from power, are 'negative or privative terms"[97] whose union would not result in the resolution of the contradictions that the domestic gender system imposes but in "the very caricature of a dialectical resolution…merely a horrible object-lesson"[98]. Oates' explanation of the brother-sister plot as it appears in her work may be found in her highly original reading of Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights. "Bronte's emotions," Oates explains, "are clearly caught up with" the "child's predilections" as demonstrated by the relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, but "the greatness of her genius as a novelist allows her a magnanimity, an imaginative elasticity, that challenges the vey premises…of the Romantic exaltation of the child and childhood's innocence."[99] The deep attachment of Bronte's girl and boy – a sibling love with the intensity of chaste incest. It freezes them, as Oates argues, into "a single attitude, they are an attitude, and can never develop"[100] A second couple, young Catherine and Hareton, supplant the symbolic brother and sister. The relationship of the second couple is marked not by the rigidity and obsession of the first but by maturity and accommodation. So, as the book ends, "suddenly childhood is past; it retreats to a darkly romantic and altogether poignant legend, a 'fiction' of surpassing beauty but belonging to a remote time."[101] The great appeal of the first Catherine and her Heathcliff, in Oates' view, is that they give voice to the preoccupations, "this seductive and deathly centripetal force we all carry within us."[102] It is tempting to imagine Oates' affectionate brothers and sisters forming alliances that balance oppositions which is the stasis

of Genna and the movement of Rickie. The family dilemma includes the pessimism of Maureen and the optimism of Jules, but Oates' fictions reject a retreat to romantic and innocent solutions. Oates declines an art of "regressive fantasies": "the role of the superior intellect is not to honor incompletion…but to help bring about fulfillment of potentialities."[103] The problem of power that Oates' domestic fiction evokes cannot be eluded. Brothers and sisters must refuse alliances that stultify growth with familiarity and so they must separate to struggle toward completion. The adult limitations that must concern them can be challenged only through their troubled relations with fathers, mothers and grown up lovers.

In her novels Oates creates recurrent female types in the form of mothers and daughters. The mothers namely Clara of A Garden of Earthly Delights, Nada of Expensive People, Loretta of them and Ariah of The Falls – have all perfected the art of survival but at the cost to the people around them, their lovers and husbands and maladjusted children. They are cheerful and adjustable, egoistical and self-sufficient. They are also feline and attractive, opportunistic and pragmatic, manipulative and amoral. All are ambitious materially and socially, and all, except Loretta, have jettisoned themselves into a higher social and economic position. All experience self- doubt or sexual inhibition. However, their cold self-sufficiency closes them off from genuine feeling and denies them the emotional release which is so basic to true liberation in Oates' novels. The mothers engage Oates' attention less fully than the other type, the daughters. Maureen and Nadine of them, Minette of Black Girl/ White Girl, share a selfless sisterhood. They are fragile, quiet, insecure, introspective, and above all, vacuous. Opposed to the catlike agility of the mothers, the daughters have little resilience and are incapable of dealing with the unexpected. They are skirting the edges of severe psychological disorder. Maureen catatonic state and Minette somnolent trance are expressions of extreme anxiety neuroses. Nadine attempts to kill her lover Jules and herself:

> She pulled the trigger. The bullet struck him somewhere in the chest, a terrible blow. [104]

Concerned obsessively with orderliness and containment, they are either sexually frigid or inhibited, some even risk sexual involvement. Maureen first resorts to prostitution in order to provide the money that seems to be necessary for security and then sets out to get married and thereby finds security and identity in the stereotypical role of American wife. Nadine and Minette are locked in frigidity are ultimately relieved of the burden of nonbeing. The relationships between mother and daughter in them demonstrate the daughter's unwillingness to simply accept their mother's unexamined powerlessness. The daughters confront feminine impotence and attempt to avoid, correct, or control it. Oates probes into the changing images of women in the family with regard to their relative including their husbands, lovers, and, children. Women in Oates' fictional world have many faces. The women in her novels are humans with flesh and blood living in American society. They have to cope with an important problem namely; how to survive. Their lives are complicated by the fact that they are internally obsessed with fear and insecurity resulting from marriage, economic independence, and low social status, and simultaneously they easily fall victims to violence (i.e. harassment, rape, murder) which not only tramples on their dignity as humans but threatens their lives. [105]

Often for Oates' women freedom seems to lie in the deadening of emotion and in the deliberate quest for nothingness. Ariah of The Falls is one such example. The novel unfurls a drama of parents and their children; of secrets and sins; of lawsuits, murder and, eventually redemption. Ariah, the bride turned widow of the repressed homosexual clergyman whose failed ambition was to reconcile an evolution with Genesis in the Bible. She is a music teacher whose sense of being damned has a "fatal smugness", and is soon betrothed to Dirk

Burnaby, a lawyer gilded by wealth and good looks, with whom she has three children- Chandler, Royall and Juliet. Oates has denoted that she veers between an embittered Swiftian irony about humankind, and idealism. Unselfishly decent men contest Ariah's pessimism and inward-looking isolationism. Ariah's love shifts to something darker as she becomes obsessed with the idea of losing Dirk, and when her children come along, her love for them is so fierce and so charged that it is absolutely terrifying:

> I have to protect my own children. They come first, and - nothing comes second! [106]

Ariah is shocked by her husband's suicide - and feels that it was because of their first more-than-awkward night as man and wife. She cautiously attempts to shore up her self through a new life while renting an apartment near the Troy Academy of Music, and living alone. Ariah tries to cope with "the Shame" by reducing her life to an uncomplicated routine of work and rest. Dirk serves as a catalyst in the transformation of Ariah. When he proposes to her, she was scared that he will "leave me, too. On our honeymoon."[107] However, she is assured by Dirk:

> Ariah, why would I leave you? I adore you. You're my soul.[108]

They enter into a matrimony which no one approves, but Ariah enters into a blissful marriage as she has the assurance and the love of Dirk. Their rapturous happiness is shadowed only by Ariah's illogical conviction over the years that Dirk will leave her and their three children someday. When their first child was born she hopes that the baby will serve a reason for Dirk to stay:

> You won't leave me for a while now, I guess? Now Baby is here.[109]

Her unreasonable fear becomes self-fulfilling when her increasingly unstable behavior, combined with Dirk's obsessed but chaste involvement with Nina Olshaker. She is a young mother who enlists his help in alerting the city fathers to the pestilential conditions in the area later to be known as Love Canal. This incident opens a chasm in their marriage. Ariah's erratic behavior becomes more than the family can bear, especially after Dirk takes on the intriguing and beguiling Nina and the Love Canal case. Nina wants Dirk to alert the city's forefathers to the dangerous toxic dump that her neighborhood has become. The case begins to unravel Dirk's marriage, his practice and his standing in the community. His involvement in the case costs him his life. After the death of her second husband, Ariah sits on the brink of near madness. Disillusioned in her hopes and ideals, and awakened to the world of hurt, betrayal, and humiliation, she closed the door upon 'them' and tells her children that if people ask about their father they should "tell them: it happened before I was born."[110] She becomes emotionally withdrawn and welcomes only the piano students into her house. She is rigidly encased in her mental concepts of the self and hypersensitive to her ego's fragility:

> The air of self-hurt and of reveling in self-hurt was Ariah's own…Ariah shut the door upon *them*. Locked all the windows and pulled down the blinds. [111]

Carol Shields states:

> "It might be argued that all literature is ultimately about family, the creation of structures – drama, poetry, fiction – that reflect our immediate and randomly assigned circle of others, what families do to us and how they can be reimagined or transcended. [112]

Rayna Rapp in her book Promissory Notes: Women and the Transition to Socialism insists that we must "deconstruct the family as a natural unit, and reconstruct it as a social one." During the process, she predicts:

> We'll find one very important aspect of the family is ideological. As such, its very meaning becomes a terrain of struggle.[113]

The family in Oates' work is more than an aggregate of blood – related individuals. It is the psychosocial engine of economic power and it regulates its experiential effects. According to Fredric Jameson, the romance is a form that Oates has been considering and rejecting. It eventually capitulates to false resolution, but a "literary text...will keep faith with impossibility...and insist to the end on everything problematical...that makes for genuine historical change."[114] Oates contributes towards a genuine literature that extensively exposes the abusive definitions of power that are expressed through the concept of family in all problematic complications. For Oates, the relationships within the modern family become an inherent terrain of struggle.

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speaking to have this Freudian romance, one must have a good father figure, so its not quite that… but close to it, I think. Robert Philips. "Joyce Carol Oates: The Art of Fiction." Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations 1970-2006. Greg Johnson, ed. USA: Ontario Review Press, 2006. 68. Print.

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This chapter shall precepts that are related to violence as a means of expression in the works of Oates. Violence constitutes a major theme in her novels. It occupies a central position in her works and often acts as an effective symbolic device. It also expresses the malaise which affects American society. Sometimes violence is the symptom of an inner malady, at other times it is the means of a desperate release. It is sometimes the expression of a seething emotion, and at other times a catharsis. Whatever it might express or symbolize, the role of violence as a means of communication in a society where alienation and isolation are the norms, cannot be overlooked. Traditionally, violence has been the expression of some basic human emotion. According to Judd Marmor:

> Certain specific forms of psychopathology are particularly prone to acts of violence. Thus the impairment of superego controls seen in sociopathic and psychopathic personalities often leads to acts of violence, as do the psychotic delusion of some schizophrenics, specially paranoid types and the reality distortion of paranoid personalities.[1]

Oates' fiction as mentioned in the other chapters, reflects American society. She encapsulates her characters within a socio-economic framework which challenges their endurance and their spirit to the very limits. Very often her characters resort to violence as a reaction to the pressures that are imposed upon them.This violence is especially significant because:

> It can bring a man to the brink of self-discovery and often serves as an affirmation of his humanity. But ultimately, it has no lasting effect; violence cannot confer power, which is what those who turn to violence seek. It may for a while assuage one's feelings of impotence, but it does not permanently change his life.[2]

The temptation to resoryt to violence has another advantage which is that of being able to speedily overcome its immediate provocation. Hannah Arendt explains:

> To resort to violence when confronted with outrageous events or condition, is enormously tempting because of its immediacy and swiftness. [3]

Violence is the illegitimate or unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the will or desire of others,[4] and Oates is only too aware of the fiercely competitive nature of American society and its close connection to violent outbursts. Not only is American society competitive, but it is also geared towards a destructive materialism. Although certain classes or economic sections are more vulnerable to it, it is omnipresent and thereby erupting in different contexts. It affects everyone directly or indirectly in some form or the other. Hannah Arendt again denotes that:

> 'Each individual performs an irrevocable action' in order to burn his bridges to respectable society before he is admitted into the community of violence.[5]

However, she continues to say that once a man is admitted, he will fall under the intoxicating spell of:

> The practice of violence (which) binds men together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward.[6]

Oates fiction does alarm and repel and her characters often perform irrevocable actions. However, Oates describes an oppressive and insistent rhythm of American life. In answer to questions about the violence in her fiction, she said:

> These things do not have to be contrived. This is America.[7]

Oates' America is the America which is screaming from the headlines of the daily presses.[8] Oates often sets this 'headline' picture of American life against the larger canvas of American history. Walter Benjamin states:

> Violence can first be sought only in the realms, not of ends.[9]

These observations provide a critique of violence with more – and certainly different – premises than it perhaps appears. It imposes itself in the question as to whether violence, in a given case, is a means to a just or an unjust end. A critique of it would then be implied in a system of just ends. This, however, is not so. For what such a system, assuming it to be secure against all doubt, would contain is not a criterion for violence itself as a principle, but, rather, the criterion for cases of its use. The question would remain open in terms of whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends. To resolve this question a more exact criterion is needed, which would discriminate within the sphere of means themselves, without regard for the ends they serve. The exclusion of this more precise critical approach is perhaps the predominant feature of a main current of legal philosophy: natural law. It perceives in the use of violent means to just end no greater problem than that which a man sees in his "right" to move his body in the direction of a desired goal. According to this view violence is a product of nature, as it were a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematic, unless force is misused for unjust ends. This is exactly what Oates' work expresses. Hers is a world in which there is a constant sense of drift, deterioration and the end of things. She placed her characters at the breaking points of society and carrying the strain in them. If, according to the theory of natural law, people give up all their violence for the sake of the state, this is done on the assumption that the individual, before the conclusion of this rational contract, has *de jure* the right to use at will the violence that is *de facto* at the individual's disposal. Perhaps these views have been rekindled by Darwin's biology, which,

in a thoroughly dogmatic manner, regards violence as the only original means, besides natural selection, appropriate to all the vital ends of nature. Popular Darwinistic philosophy has often shown how short a step it is from this dogma of natural history to the still cruder one of legal philosophy, which holds that the violence that is, almost alone, appropriate to natural ends is thereby also legal.[10]

Oates is primarily concerned with a kind of Darwinian struggle for existence between minds, with the truth of the universal human struggle. Her characters are opaque, ungiving and uncharming. She speaks 'in them,' but they are not articulate. In one of her interviews Oates deduces:

> I am enormously interested in other people, other lives, and that with the least provocation, I could "go into" your personality and try to imagine it, try to find a way of dramatizing it. I am fascinated by people I meet, or don't meet, people I correspond with, or read about; and I hope my interest in them isn't vampiristic, because I don't want to take life from them, but only to honor the life in them, to give some permanent form to their personalities. It seems to me that there are so many people who are inarticulate, but who suffer and doubt and love, nobly, who need to be immortalized or at least explained.[11]

It is this desire to tell the whole truth about the way people live that makes Oates, in Walter Clemons word, "shockproof." She says that:

> It seems that I write about things that are violent and extreme, but it is always against a background of something deep and imperishable. I feel I can wade in blood, I can endure the 10,000 evil visions because there is this absolutely imperishable reality behind it. [12]

Oates is primarily concerned with a kind of Darwinian struggle for existence between minds, with the truth of the universal human struggle. Her characters are opaque, ungiving and uncharming. She speaks 'in them,' but they are not articulate. Some writers also have also expressed a sense of defeat when confronting the 'monster of American life'. Norman Mailer confesses that:

> The nature of existence cannot be felt anymore. As novelists, we cannot locate our center of values.[13]

Philip Roth has also complained of the impossibility of realistically portraying American life:

> The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.[14]

Many American writers have met the challenge of current American life by writing "fabulous" fictions. That is:

> Because experience tumbles fact and fiction, fidelity to some concept of 'ordinary' experience seems close to impossible. All ordinary experience recedes into the fabulous…[15]

Verisimilitude yields to the broader, more exaggerated contours of the fable. Along with the fabulators, Oates recognizes the fabulous quality in American life, but in her writing she makes an extraordinary peace with the reality of this life. Instead of writing fictions that are

more fabulous than the headlines, she uses these headline events to form the plots of her stories. Her characters navigate through a world that is fabulous, but it is a world that is recognizably America. Her characters are locked in history and time; they exist in and are vulnerable to American culture. Jules Wendall of them is one such example. He is one of Oates' most complex and effective character portrayals. His personal nature – naive and cynical, loving and violent, embodies the energy and idealism of a potentially heroic figure. His struggle out of poverty and his absorption in the American dream – helps create a more sinister Jules namely, the petty criminal, the world – weary cynic, and ultimately the murderer. Jules becomes, in effect, the human embodiment of Detroit and thus represents the violent contradictions of America: its admirable energy and optimism, its false values and violent power struggles. Oates writes:

> Of the effort the spirit makes, this is the subject of Jules's story; of its effort to achieve freedom, its breaking out into beauty, in patches perhaps but beauty anyway, and of Jules as an American youth – these are some of the struggles he would have thought worth recording. [16]

Although violence is a dominant mode of contemporary fiction, many contemporary writers, especially the fabulators, objectifies the violent and absurd aspects of their culture.[14] Oates, on the other hand, is usually meticulous in drawing her realistic settings. Eventually when a fabulous event invades ordinary circumstances, it is jarring and disturbing because it is made part of the ordinary flow of time and it is not isolated by the imagination from life. The violence in A Garden of Earthly Delights (1966) is an insistent pervasive atmosphere of emotional violence in the form of deceit, guilt, hatred and alienation. Carleton's character seems to be based on Hans Toch's statement that:

> Violence feeds on low self-esteem and a sense of inadequacy. [17]

He has fallen in his own eyes and he feels inadequate because he is not able to handle his life and give it the direction that he wants to. He belongs to a family that once owned a farm and had subsequently lost possession of the same during the Depression. He has separated from his parents, and since then has been on the move with his family:

> …what really hurt was him, Carleton, not being able to get back to that place: a few miles from his father's farm that was hundreds of miles away from where Carleton was now. At night before he sank into an exhausted sleep like a stone sinking through murky water he had to endure the flash of rows of beans or strawberries or sweet corn that made his fingers twitch before he'd be surprised by a circle of warmly smiling faces adult faces of his family and relatives when he'd been a boy; and his dream might open up (the walls melting away like in a motion picture) to show him the vegetable garden, and the pear orchard the barnyard with its old rotting rich-smelling haystack and the hay barn itself – everything! All he'd lost… He was too shamed to return. He had never repaid the money he owed, only just sending a few dollars at some time like Christmas then ceasing. For a terrible time...[18]

Oates portrays Carleton as a man whose self-hood depends on a larger context. The metaphor that Oates employs for this larger context is, significantly, "names". He can maintain a sense of self only by whispering "names" to himself: "names of his family first, then distant relatives, then neighbors, then distant neighbors…Only when he felt that he had named everyone, and that he knew where he was among them he could fall asleep."[19] Events however, break him down. With an "emotion like love" he kills his best friend Rafe, in a barroom brawl; his wife dies in giving birth to her seventh child; another friend Bert is beaten by the local police for procuring for his own daughter; one of Carleton's daughters runs away

ostensibly to get married; his son is scab-covered. He is a strange who bites off the heads of live birds to entertain his friends; and Clara, his favorite, runs off with a man she had met in a bar. He dies of what seems to be intestinal cancer two months after Clara's disappearance.

However, Oates portrays Carleton's failure as only partially due to the intrusion of events that in nightmarish succession block his goal. The more compelling reason for his failure is the anachronistic nature of his goal. His father was a blacksmith and Carleton had grown up admiring families with eight children. He himself is land – oriented and he respects family structure and roots. He was forced from this life by an abstract power, by a national economic failure and his personal destiny was controlled by agents which he could not influence. He is locked in a time when migration is the condition of life. The values that cause Carleton to associate his identity with his lost farm and the family unite are incongruous with a 1930's world where personal destiny seems to be shaped to a great extent by economic and political forces. The larger effect of these historical forces on the quality of human life have been defined by Hannah Arendt. She describes the condition of the "loss of a privately owned share in the world," the condition of Carleton in the novel, as the first stage of "world alienation.":

> The first stage of this alienation was marked by its cruelty, the misery and material wretchedness it meant for a steadily increasing number of 'laboring poor,' whom expropriation deprived of the twofold protection of family and property, that is, of a family-owned private share in the world, which until the modern age had housed the individual process and the laboring activity subject to its necessities. The second stage was reached when society had been its subject before. Membership in a social class replaced the protection previously

> offered by membership in a family, and social solidarity became a very efficient substitute for the earlier, natural solidarity ruling the family unit. [20]

Clara, as opposed to her father, aspires to a membership in a social class which is embodied by the wealthy Revere, thus enacting the second stage of world alienation as her father had enacted the first. Although she never becomes truly accepted by that social class, she is satisfied with the material objects by which this class is identified:

> So happy! This was her new life, and there was a man she was waiting for: There was a man her hopes could fasten upon, always.[21]

Oates depicts Clara as an illiterate; therefore her consciousness is molded by what she sees and experiences. As a child, she models her hopes for the future, away from the migrant camps, on images from school books - a white frame house, a smiling family – from glossy magazine pictures of mountains, castles, movie stars, and things; from a five-and-dime store whose goods represent all that she does not have and wants:

> She felt the dime in her pocket again. Her fingers were beginning to smell from it…A salesgirl was leaning across the counter to talk to another salesgirl…Clara stared at them, trying to make out their conversation; she could not imagine what it would be like to be one of those girls. 'I'm gonna work in one of those places someday,' she said to Rosalie.[22]

The book's second section, "Lowry," which is narrated mainly from the point of view of fifteen-year-old Clara, Lowry, (the man with whom she escapes migrant life), establishes her in the town of Tintern. He finds her a job as a clerk in a five-and-dime store and a room to live in. Clara utilizes her time while working and waiting for Lowry even as she spends time idealizing him:

> She was sixteen now, and by the time the baby was born she would be seventeen. Every morning after Lowry had left she woke up to the clear, unmistakable knowledge of what had happened to her and what it meant. The dreaminess of the past two weeks had vanished. She stared long and hard at things. It might have been that she didn't trust them – that she wanted to make sure they stayed still, kept their shapes, identities. She thought about the baby obsessively and of Lowry who would be kept alive in this way. [23]

To Clara, Lowry is different from her father and the other men that she chances to meet whose "fathers had lost their land" and "who could not control anything." She considers him both an escape from and a substitute for her father. Unfortunately, for all his apparent independence, Lowry is also homeless, dispossessed and finally cannot even control Clara, since when he takes to the road, she casts aside his belief that one's fate is determined by accident. Going to bed with the unhappily married Curt Revere, she finds a father for Lowry's unborn child and a means of bringing "all those accidents into control."[24]Oates portrays the effects of the imperialistic will on the associated life through her portrait of Clara in the Revere household. Clara's introduction into the Revere household begins in the process which finally results in the disintegration of the Revere family. Her manipulation directly and indirectly results in the death of one Revere son, the disinheritance of another, the disappearance of a third, and the death of Revere himself. For Clara, the Revere name signifies not a collection of related people associated with a certain property, but merely a wealthy social class. The intrusion of her materialistic values, and her appropriation of the name, disrupts the family and leads to events that annihilate it.

As Hannah Arendt's argument indicated, world alienation is a process through which the individual's relationship to existence becomes more and more abstract, until he feels completely alone, rootless and purposeless:

> Just as the family and its property were replaced by class membership and national territory, so mankind now begins to replace the nationally bound societies, and the earth replaces the limited state territory.[25]

The process of world alienation, which began with Carleton, is completed in the third generation by Clara's son, Swan. Swan grows into adulthood in the hostile Revere household, while Clara plots mechanically and successfully in order to disinherit Revere's three sons so that her husband's empire will fall, after his death, to her son. Clara's purpose is to usurp a name and a world for her son to inhabit all in order to establish his "fate" with her will. While pregnant, Clara imagines her child:

> Appearing before the legs of aged people and pushing them aside, impatiently, with somewhere to go…It would have a last name and a world and want nothing. [26]

What Clara implies here is power, which is an instrument of rule. Sartre states that:

> A man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will," which gives him "incomparable pleasure.[27]

Power, authority, and violence- these are but words which indicate the means by which man rules over man, and Clara wants to imbibe these in Swan.

It is through the sheer power of will that Oates' characters hope to overcome their dislocation, to compel a sustaining world into existence. [28] And if there is a failure underlying

all of her protagonists' struggles; it is the failure of will to compensate for the loss of a world. In Swan's case, it is a loss of origins. In Oates, it is not history that lies at the heart of the human tragedy – for history is irrevocable; one simply cannot contest it – but an extreme and finally self –defeating assertion of will, self-defeating because it takes the individual even further into the recesses of his isolation, even further from an authentic relation to his world. Swan, even on the first day of his arrival at the Revere house, feels out of place. He voices his discomfort by noting that he and his mother are encroaching upon a world that is clearly not theirs:

> In the very air of this great stone house there was an odor that could never have belonged to their own house – an odor of weight and darkness and time…[29]

Oates' novels are populated with characters who believe themselves to be self-created and who often declare themselves to be their own progenitors. For Oates this declaration is not a symptom of their autonomy, but of their alienation.[30] In audaciously denying their fathers, they deny the source of their being and thus assert merely their homelessness. To Swan, fatherhood is a mystery. However, this is not a condition that he has willed, but a condition that has been bequeathed to him by his mother. Swan ponders the meaning of having a father. He:

> Could not quite understand what it meant to have a father. [31]

And at the "very heart" of the relationships between Revere and himself, he feels a "forlorn emptiness." Hovering above him and struggling within him is an inchoate recognition of his biological father, who is:

> Vague and remote but somehow more vivid than Revere.[32]

Clara characterizes the relationship between Swan and Lowry in terms of:

> The relationships between people and their fathers were like thin, nearly invisible wires…you might forget they were there but you never got rid of them.[33]

When Swan had been involved in a hunting "accident' that killed his stepbrother Robert, Oates had suggested that Swan's insecure place in the Revere family and his self-image as a "bastard," had led him half-consciously to kill Robert. Ironically, Robert is Revere's son who is most sympathetic to Swan and most like him; neither of them is a skilled hunter and both, in fact, feel an aversion to hunting even though it represents a masculine ritual that they must perform. Thus there is the unavoidable suggestion that by killing Robert, whether intentionally or not, Swan is attempting to kill off that part of himself which he most despises: the gentle, "weak" self who would prefer to coexist harmoniously with nature's garden rather than attempt to subdue it through brute force. However, by the time he kills Revere, his frustrations have driven him to strike out blindly and madly toward the masculine world that he feels unable to emulate and which he can imitate only the primary method of that world, which is violence:

> At the last instant Swan's hand swerved. His fingers jerked on the trigger, it was the old man he struck. Revere cried out, stumbling back against the counter. He would fall, a bullet wound would blossom red in his chest, but Swan did not see him fall. Already he had lifted the gun to his own head. [34]

Oates portrays Swan's struggle for identity as a struggle between his will and an essential self that refuses to be transformed. A secret discovery of his mother's name, (Walpole), leaves him trembling. Against this name:

> He said his real name out loud so that he wouldn't forget it: it was Steven Revere. [35]

Like Clara's and his own real father (Lowry) Swan instinctively turns to violence as an outlet for the conflicting demands that he feels within himself. He sees himself torn between one kind of garden which had been:

> Tended and tortured into a garden so complex one might need a lifetime to comprehend it.[36]

And a newer garden, one that neither his parents nor grandparents could comprehend:

> That vast systematic garden of men's minds that seemed to have been toiled into its complex existence by a sinister and inhuman spirit.[37]

Swan sometimes felt impelled to fulfill Lowry's prophecy in terms of the fact that he would be a killer and he unconsciously felt responsible for his stepbrother's accidental death. More often, he is nauseated by violent death of all kinds. The impulsion that eventually triumphs is primarily the result of his thwarted desire for total control. The desire has not been satisfied by reading, which he gives up when he realizes that he can never command all:

> That vast systematic garden of men's minds. [38]

Nor by usurping Revere's economic control of Eden County, that "garden so complex."[39]Indeed, nothing short of total control would seem to suffice. The impulsion, on the other hand, is compounded by his intuitive sense that the prophet hovering over him like a hawkish fury is his true father, Clara's true love and master. It is compounded further by his belief that Revere will disown a son who is not a hunter. Thus, both fathers deny him a home,

both (along with Clara's lovers) traverse him control of his mother's affections, and both urge him towards violence.

Swan takes refuge in introspective withdrawal, while reviling his mother for her strange conspiracy to mould him. Swan has developed a confusing admiration for Revere himself, and eventually the confused energies which have initially been repressed and distorted, emerge, typically in an act of radical violence, like that of Carleton. He confronts Revere and Clara with a gun, while drunkenly searching for the conflicting truths which are destroying him. Clara's final confrontation with her son recapitulates the goading pressure and urgent ambition of his whole life. She screams out what has been the terrifying truth of her self-sacrifice, which "all my life was for you – all of it – You crazy fool!" Then she taunts him with what she sees as his real father's weakness, at the level of vulnerability that she has never allowed to emerge in herself:

> That's my secret about you – you're weak just like he was…What did it get him? Nothing! Nothing! You're just like him! [40]

She taunts him to pull the trigger. The gun goes off and, as Swan pulls it aside at the last minute, accidentally – (and all the more horrible because it is an accident) – Revere is killed. Clara collapses, and ends up deranged in a hospital. Swan's sense of frustration and lost identity marks an ironic return to the fate of his grandfather. His shooting of Revere instead of his mother is both a mistake and a misplaced and confused act of revenge for his real father – while Clara's struggle to control her life and her son's ends with her as powerless as her mother. She lives on, a mindless body and is psychologically exhausted, with no sense of social context or psychic continuity.

Hans Toch states that:

> Violent people are persons more hostile than other people and less able to keep their hostility in check. In reviewing the histories of such people, clinicians have found their early tears suffused with pain, childhood marked by neglect and disappointment and lives framed by sterile, loveless surroundings. In these contexts, clinicians assume that reservoirs of bitterness are fed and self-regard and self-control are inhibited. Individuals can thus be formed who are touchy and explosive and who are unable to curb their own rage.[41]

Although the logic of violence may emerge from the practice of violence, it probably originates most frequently in the interpersonal. Expensive people (1968) as mentioned in the previous chapters is an extravagant experiment which is radically different in style and development from Oates' previous books and is idiosyncratic even in the light of her later works. Although the deeper concerns of this novel reflect the general preoccupations of her works, it is a novel dealing with a spectrum of American social and economic patterns. Oates, in trying to get behind the surface of American society has encountered the unpredictable absurdities, contradictions, and paradox of dreams. The novel with its climactic episode of self-destructive violence is perceived as an expression of the radical discontent, the despair, the bewilderment and outrage of a generation of young and idealistic American that is confronted by an America of the elders who are steeped in political hypocrisy and cynicism as to seem virtually irremediable, except by the most extreme means. When the child murderer (Richard) realizes that he has become a mere "Minor Character" in his mother's life, he is made to realize a sense of absolute impotence and despair. He slips forever "out of focus." A desperate act of matricide will not restore his soul to him but will at least remove the living object of his love and grief. "No story is really fiction," as Oates has written:

> The aim of a serious, respectful art is to externalize personal, private, shapeless fantasies into structures that are recognizable to other people.[42]

What Expensive People shapes into recognition is the self-consciousness that has, both historically and mythically, created the America that it reflects. Oates' characters, in an imitation of heroism, are continually searching for enemies to overcome. However, because their true enemies are unknown to them, these expensive people battle freeway traffic, or even chipmunks that have invaded the basement. In one episode, Oates parodies a battle scene in her description of Mr. Hofstadter driving on the expressway:

> As the 'driving' set upon him…his neck grew thicker and stronger as if preparing for battle…His hands gripped the wheel the way they might have gripped any weapon, with confidence and pride and barely restrained vengeance.[43]

Hofstadter and his counterparts are highly competitive, natural warriors without a war, a cause, or a visible enemy. Yet the inherent perception underlying all of these absurd battles is that the enemy is not outside but inside. It is an enemy who urges to expand the peoples' energy in the name of some "transpersonal ideal," to which, in Oates' outrageous parody of romantic aspirations, entry is thought to be gained by doing battle on a freeway.

Oates portrays suburbia as a perverse burlesque of Western Civilization where aspects of American culture are devalued and turned into names of places and people. El Dorado is a beauty parlor; Medusa is a hair style; Behemoth a boys school; Labyrinth, Bunker Hill, Arcadia, Burning Bush are street names; ancient Egypt is preserved in dangling jewelry; Dante an excuse for a women's club meeting, Pandora a socialite, Voyd a lawyer. The names of places such as El Dorado, Fernwood and Arcadia, with which Oates has strewn her

narrative, suggest an ironic equation of suburbia within the secular paradise. Implicit in that equation is Oates' parody of the American dream of an earthly paradise. Frederic I. Carpenter explains:

> The ideas underlying the (American) dream, only that of place has been wholly "American," for essentially the dream is as old as the mind of man. Earlier versions had placed it in Eden or in Heaven, in Atlantis or in Utopia; but always in some country of the imagination. Then the discovery of the new world gave substance to the old myth, and suggested the realization of it on actual earth. America became "the place" where the religious prophecies of Isaiah and the Republican ideals of Plato might be realized.[44]

Oates while exploiting the aspect of the American Dream denotes that it is apparent from Richard's assertion that Fernwood, the suburb in which he lives is inherently 'paradise':

> If God remakes Paradise it will be in the image of Fernwood, for Fernwood is an angel's breath from heaven. It is as real as any dream, more real than a nightmare, terribly real, heavily real…Fernwood is Paradise and it is real! [45]

Oates depicts Fernwood as paradise in a very real, though deeply ironic, sense. Paradise is a place where all vertical movement ends. In paradise there is nowhere to go, no further purpose to be achieved, no desire to feel, no objects to be obtained, no territory to conquer, no truth to be discovered, no beauty to be revealed, no vision beyond it. It is a dead end. The aimlessness of Fernwood's adventurers and in fact, the whole tenor of these expensive people's activities, suggests this sense of sub-urban paradise. Oates could not have chosen a more appropriate metaphor to express, at the same time, the temerity, stagnation, the violence, and finally, the danger of this American dream.

For Oates, suburbia provides an instance, within the "penumbra of time and place and circumstance," of the nature of man's limitations. When morality resides in right desire rather than right action, then the world is no longer the field of man's being. Yet it is situated emphatically in the world which Oates' characters inhabit, and it is by their acts and not by their desires that she measures them. No one can doubt that Hofstadter, Nada and Richard are driven by a desire – albeit egoistical and deluded – for the Good. However, this is not by deliberate cruelty, although cruelty is often the result of their attempt to realize their desires; one cannot doubt that suburbia is created out of a genuine desire for an earthly paradise and not out of intentional fatuity.

In the words of T.S.Eliot, "Between the idea and the reality…falls the shadow."[46] For Oates this shadow is swollen with man's limitations, and for her it is the proper subject of tragedy:

> We need to ask what tragedy has dealt with all along – has it not been the limitations of the human world? What is negotiable, accessible, what can be given proper incantatory names, what is, in Nietzche's phrasing, 'thinkable' – this is the domestic landscape out of which the wilderness will be shaped. If communal belief in God has diminished so that, as writers, we can no longer presume upon it, then a redefinition of God in terms of the furthest reaches of man's hallucinations can provide us with a new basis for tragedy.[47]

Expensive People centers upon the conflict between the two opposing dreams of its central characters: Nada's for freedom and Richard's for mother-love. Moreover, it is the first dream that converts the child's birthright to his mother's love and depicts it in terms of the impossible dream. In Oates' vision, freedom obviates love because in loving, the burden of otherness is acknowledged. Oates often uses children or young adolescents as dual symbols

of human impotence and idealism, and these are emblems of human limitations, and they are powerless in terms of a realization of their dreams. Oates provides a delicate ingredient without which no American suburb would be complete – violence was first hinted at comically in Nada's hairdresser, whose "cool indifference" and "flippant razor" reminds him of the possibility that even she, protected and cosseted by this world of beauty:

> Might die? Some day die? That her lovely blood might be spilled.[48]

The novel incorporates the elements for what Oates defines as tragedy:

> The art of tragedy grows out of a break between self and community, a sense of isolation. At its base is fear. If it is not always true that human life possesses value, it is at least true that some human life, or the abstract parody of human life as acted out by gods, has a profound and magical value, inexplicable. The drama begins only when a unique human reality asserts its passion against the totality of passion, "arranging the same materials in a unique pattern," risking loss of self in an attempt to realize self-there steps forward out of the world an Oedipus, an Antigone. [49]

At tragedy's center is the inevitable failure to find fulfillment. Oates' process of fictionalizing Richard's life incorporates elements of unfulfilled ideals that contribute to this sense of tragedy.Richard judges his mother's repressive domination of him as an attempt to manipulate and partly live vicariously through the life of another. His destruction of his school files and the eventual writing of his own memoirs are attempts to assert his autonomy against her novelistic control. However, the reality that he attempts to assert namely – arson, sniping, and eventual murder – are themselves a series of fantasies. He acts out his mother's

play ("The Sniper") and then becomes upset when another sniper invades and distorts his fiction.

Much later Richard's terrors are made real as he sneaks into the neighborhood and, emulates his mother's fictional creation. He fires his mail-order rifle into the living room of the family lawyer. Then after three successful undetected raids, the macabre fun mounts as:

> Ladies and gentlemen, another sniper stepped out of the light and into the darkness, following my lead.[50]

Finally, Richard caps his imitators' creations with his own final masterpiece, and shoots his mother:

> I ran out of the back door with my rifle, heavy and ludicrous in Father's shoes, and around the house away from the driveway – which was too open- so that I could inch along between our evergreens and the wall of the house. Near the front, at the corner, I waited for only a few seconds, and then the front door opened and Nada appeared on the walk with her suitcase…and indeed I hardly took notice of Nada herself, as if she no longer existed for me, except to raise the rifle and fire at her, the barrel of the gun swerving up to bring the telescope to my eye as if some terrible force were sucking it from me. And I didn't need to see what happened because I knew.[51]

Richard's rebellions against his school, his mother's art, and her chaotic and hypocritical life, are all attempts at authentic acts which culminate in his purchase of the rifle and the willed violence that he perpetrates. His actions bring about a strange frenzied joy and a sense of coming alive which makes him feel isolated yet free, lonely yet authentic. Earlier Richard had realized that when it came to his parents:

> Stage props were ripped away, they always showed that they needed no fresh reasons to hate. They simply hated.[52]

Similarly now, he has deliberately chosen to break through the factitious world that surrounds him. Violence has become an affirmation of his freedom. Yet, while the murder of his mother is a free, liberating act, once it is completed, there is no rapturous discovery. His confession is not believed, the surfaces of suburbia close over the deed. He is denied the world's recognition of his terrible freedom and his fiction making is a failure. Even as he writes, the apparent reality he has so carefully ordered has slipped out of his grasp:

> My career as a writer now ends, and I don't have time to look through what I've written. Let it stand. I am being carried along on the wave of a most prodigious hunger. All I ask is the strength to fill the emptiness inside me, to stuff it once and for all! That, and the fierce consolation of knowing that whatever I did, whatever degradations and evils, stupidities, blunders, moronic intrusions, whatever single ghastly act I did manage to achieve, it was done out of freedom, out of choice. This is the only consolation I have in the face of death, my readers; the thought of my free will. But I must confess that there are moments when I doubt even this consolation…[53]

Oates also emphasizes that there are few psychologically determining family relationships, which reflect upheaval and personal violence. She:

> Always provides either directly or by suggestion a psychological history of her characters, the fiction itself suggests a basically psychoanalytical explanation for characters' motivation as well as for the inevitable catastrophes.[54]

An important aspect of Oates' stand regarding the relationships of love in terms of presuming its "psychologically determining" nature, is that people are often driven to violence when they are denied love. Desperately hoping to stave off disaster by "fashioning pattern out of flux and sense out absurdity"[55] for them a potentially fulfilling love relationship is a promise of security. Denied this they are provoked into violent actions. It is this element of denial that finally leads Richard to kill his mother.

Oates' primary focus is on the struggle for autonomy by the personality of which her landscapes are perspectival reflections. Counteracting the violence and mobility of her picture of America is the tone of celebration which is based on an awareness that the inner landscape, namely the human personality and its dreams and desires, is what creates the external world. Uniting Oates' dream of America is the restlessness of the human personality itself. Home is where the moving van roams; the paranoid search for material security is the external sign of an inner restlessness which is born of the dream of an America that is permanent only in its changes and chances. Of this perspective Oates realizes:

> The greatest works of literature deal with the human soul caught in the stampede of time, unable to gauge the profundity of what passes over it.[56]

She has described herself as a "psychological realist," which she explains as taking "the area of the human psyche, or mind, as the centre of all experience to reality."[57] Her stories evoke through the confusion of metaphysical yearning, physical and emotional anguish a sense of the fragility of the personality in sexual love and the tragedy of inner fear. She has commented upon how various readers have found their evocation of paranoid paralysis disturbingly true in terms of their own relationships. Love in her context, is understood as a surprising reaffirmation of the deepest hopes, and she feels that to refuse its fulfillment is to acknowledge the lack of courage to live except in the shallows of life. What love, (even in its

fear, violence, and pain), brings to everyone is that through the terror and through the very vulnerability of the personality, the openness to change is what finally makes for redemption. To support this statement, Jules Wendall of them is, again, the finest example for it. Unlike his mother Loretta and his sister Maureen, who have accommodated themselves to the surrounding reality and have become distorted, pathetic figures, Jules maintains his heroic stature by assimilating the full horror of his experiences. This is in keeping with their social implications, and then continuing forward on to a new and unimagined sphere of life. He has escaped a criminal environment only by becoming – in a single, allegorical act of violence – a criminal himself. Considering all that has gone before, Jules' unduly optimism at the close of the novel is because he has achieved an expansion of spirit and consciousness that enables him to see himself in a dual perspective. He sees himself as one who has suffered unjustly, along with his family and others, and also as one who has transcended his past in what might be called a herioc triumph of the spirit. Thus when Maureen tells him she must reject her past and her family:

> I'm not going to see them anymore,[58]

Jules understands her distorted outlook and reminds her gently:

> But, honey, aren't you one of *them* yourself? [59]

them (1969) is written in the fluid, refined style that characterizes everything by Oates. However, this novel has a more elaborate and more symmetrical structure than her previous works. It is a study in 'surfaces' because the characters know only the 'surfaces' of their lives; the painful core of their experience never reaches them as being what their lives are about. them is about life at various cultural and social levels in the United States and it explores the classes in between namely the lower middle class particularly who are

swallowed by a mechanized society. The book is a tripartite account of two generations of the Wendall families, whose lives never make newspaper headlines but are nonetheless darkly determined by the limiting, hostile environment of Detroit. There are processes of almost ritualistic disintegration as marriages break, relationships fail, and as private history connects with the public world; cities are burnt and political and personal discontents erupt into violence. them records how Detroit feels to its inhabitants:

> He (Jules) thought of himself as pure spirit struggling to break free of the morass of the flesh... Of the effort the spirit makes, this is the subject of Jules's story; of its effort to achieve freedom, its breaking into beauty anyway, and of Jules as an American youth – these are some of the struggles he would have thought worth recording. All of Detroit is melodrama, and most lives in Detroit fated to be melodramatic. [60]

The story employs the usual ultra dramatic surface of Oates' gothic parables: murder, rape, insanity, industrial accidents, arson, prostitution and violence of all kinds. It denotes the manner in which Oates is dealing with the social and economic roots of the characters. There is a move from a rural background, (something like Eden County), into rundown Detroit, with its poverty, violence, patrol cars, garbage, predatory sexuality, unemployment, and psychic as well as economic insecurity. "To Whose Country Have I Come?" is the title of Part 2 of the novel, and it seems there is an essential representation of the world of A Garden of Earthly Delights: Carleton's rage at dispossession of land and family has become the dominant mood of the frustrated Wendalls. Loretta, Maureen's mother, is sunk deep in the "sad limits" of her flesh, "locked" in her body as her family is locked in the economic determinism of Detroit. Her grandmother is similarly:

> Baffled at the failure of her body to keep up with her assessment of herself. [61]

Like Oates' characters elsewhere, the Wendalls are haunted by dreams of autonomy or power, but their high desires find only the crudest, dullest materializations – merely "the freedom of trucks and planes" or, more limiting, the apparent autonomy of material security. Life, as opposed to the dream, is crude, deceptive, and violent:

> A certain number of boys must grow up to die in the electric chair. [62]

is the resigned belief of Jules' school principal, and behind such fatalism is the acceptance that impotence and futility can be escaped only – and then temporarily – by violence. When one of "them" does attempt to struggle above her violent and restrictive life, the dream is once again expressed solely in terms of money and exploitation. Like Clara, for instance, Loretta is bewildered by the lure of owning a house, by marriage, by domestic comfort and above all by the power of money. Loretta's wants are fixed continually upon things, but unlike Clara, her life never affords her the space for decision or opportunity for clarity or control. Her sharpest recognitions are negative. She observes that:

> The world was pulling into two parts, those who were hopeless bastards and weren't worth spitting on and those who were going to get somewhere.[63]

Even when she acts decisively – going on the street, or leaving her husband – lacking ingenuity or drive, she bungles her attempts at autonomy and relapses for most of her life into a foul-mouthed, vacillating, sordid shrew. Money continually haunts her and just as surely eludes her all her life.

'Power' which the Wendalls craves for is, as Hannah Arendt explains "an instrument of rule" and also the "instinct of domination."[64] According to Sartre:

> A man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will," which gives him "incomparable pleasure.[65]

The most obvious method of salvation from a world that stubbornly resists their manipulation appears to be the heroic stance. The essence of which is an assertion of will, by which they attempt to rise above or refute their condition, and their fate. In characteristic American fashion, Oates' characters combat their alienation by intensifying it and by establishing themselves as apart from the rest of humanity.[66] One method by which they intensify their alienation is through violence. This violence is the response of the powerless to their impotence.[67] This argument is evident in Carleton from A Garden of Earthly Delights. His wife dies in a later childbirth, and he struggles to provide for his family while filled with some "inexpressible anger" [68] that he cannot exorcise. His bitterness smothers his sense of the reality of the world around him. Economically and socially marginalized, he nevertheless believes that, "everything – everyone – the whole world – was joined in him, only in him." [69] He sees the other laborers at the camp as "trash" and believes that he alone can "rise up out of that mud and leave them far behind." [70] The frustrated and drunken Carleton's violence provokes his daughter's (Clara) elopement. Driving hundreds of miles in search for her, Carleton slides toward despair, delirium, and eventually death.

In them Oates creates a violent, apocalyptic world, which at times seems in the final stages of disintegration, punctuated by terrible cataclysms, and bursting with malevolent passions. Writing of the contemporary novel, Ihab Hassan states that:

> Whatever the hero may now be a victim of, he is certainly not, as he was in the Thirties, a victim of systems or facts.[71]

However, them seems on the surface to be following this older tradition. The main characters – Loretta and her two children, Jules and Maureen – seem to be the victims of the system of poverty and of incontrovertible facts in the form of unexpected and usually violent events. After Loretta's brother Brock murders her lover, Bernie Malin, she submits to the lust of Howard Wendall who is a cop willing to dispose of Bernie's body. Eventually she marries him. She settles into marriage, motherhood, and a neighborhood, with the comfortable thought that:

> She had come to the end of her life…and it was a solid, good feeling to think that she would probably live here forever…[72]

However, her sleepy serenity is rocked when Howard is suspended from the force for accepting bribes from prostitutes. The entire Wendall family retreats from the city and they move to dilapidated quarters in the country. Once again, her equilibrium is disturbed, this time by the outbreak of World War II. Howard is drafted into service and she has to face the nagging of her mother-in-law alone. Unwilling to waste her youth and energy on the barren, rural landscape and the spiteful and imperious Ma Wendall, Loretta flees to Detroit, where she is arrested for prostitution on her second day in the city. World War II ends and the entire family is reunited and is bound together by the system of poverty, in the slums of Detroit. Again, a fact disrupts even these diminished circumstances. When Howard is killed in an industrial accident, Loretta is left alone to care for their three children and her ailing, querulous mother-in-law by herself. Loretta remarries, but her virile, attentive lover turns into a drunken, bad-tempered, out-of-work slum husband, who eventually nearly kills her daughter, Maureen:

> As Maureen pushed the door to the apartment it swung open. He was coming toward her. She could see a mess behind him...He came toward her and seized

> her by the neck and dragged her into the room. He was shouting something she couldn't catch. She heard the words but they were so close to her, battering her, that she could not make them out. With his free hand he began striking her. He held her up so that she couldn't fall and struck her, again and again, while she tried to get away, to fall backwards, away from his hand. She screamed. He began to strike her body. He let go of her and she fell. She put her arms up over her head and screamed against the floor, while he bent over to pound her flat on the back of his fists. [73]

Throughout the novel, money is the symbol of all that is ugly, oppressive, and yet alluring. The psychic pressures of the Detroit that is depicted in the novel are rooted in the crisp, 'cool cash' that in Expensive People had made Cedar Grove and Fernwood delectably relaxed. However, in Detroit of them, money is brutal, exploitative, soiled – "the rumpled, soft, filthy feel of bills" that Jules earns for his mother. His sister Maureen's dreams are haunted by the question "How do you get money?"[74] Money, all the Wendall family know, is "the secret." A man picks Maureen up, takes her to a hotel room; through her bewilderment, indifference, and misery but what keeps her together is the thought of money. The act would:

> Take a certain passage of time. A few minutes, several minutes…but he would give her money. That fact kept her from breaking into pieces.[75]

Jules Wendall grows up and he becomes more aware of his opportunities as a male to acquire money. His family and friends continually gripe about money; Jules determines simply and eventually to "get it," and to "float upon it." He sells himself in another way for a more obvious kind of independence. He gets hired as a gangster's driver and is immediately overwhelmed by the fierce and sudden power that money can have when he is handed a check for one hundred dollars and then is told by his employer:

> Drive straight ahead. I want to think. I have got to plan the rest of my life this morning.[76]

Jules experiences the remark upon his nerves:

> Planning the rest of his life that morning!...And why couldn't Jules plan the rest of his life too that very morning? Wasn't he free to make nearly anything happen? [77]

It is the tone, the excitement and apparent autonomy behind such remarks that is communicated to the reader:

> 'And now we must get started. I have a busy schedule this morning.'…Jules drove off. He felt giddy from the surprise of this second check. It lay beside him on the seat, and he glanced down at it to make sure it was real.[78]

In the crude, exploitative sexist society of the American city, this new financial euphoria lets Jules indulge in the exploitation of which his sister has become the victim. He stops the car outside a house in Grosse Point to watch a girl climb out of a blue station wagon. The girl is about sixteen or seventeen, dressed in all the accouterments of the characters in Expensive People. She is beautiful, casual, unconsciously provocative, and "unassailable"[79]. "So this" muses Jules "is the way life happens: a sudden ballooning upward."[80]

them is built in such a manner that Oates manages not just to depict the pervasiveness of materialism in Detroit's and America's social fabric but – as the development of her fiction to this point makes clear – on her power to evoke in her reader, the pervasiveness and brutality of basic human drives. She is writing not only about "them" but about the "American" feelings. Her subject is not Detroit and its effect on people but Detroit as a

symbol of a process that lies deep within everyone. One of the crucial emotional experiences of them is the fear and challenge of contingency, which is insistently present to Maureen as she grows up. She broods about how she can tell:

> What would last and what wouldn't? Marriage ended. Love ended. Money could be stolen, found out and taken.[81]

Such things therefore simply happen. The world she inhabits is ordered only randomly:

> Objects disappeared, slipped through cracks, devoured, kicked aside, knocked under the bed into the trash, lost. Nothing lasted for long.[82]

The tiniest arbitrary act always contains in it the possibility of cataclysm:

> Maureen thought of earthquakes opening the earth in violent rifts, swallowing city blocks, churches, railroad tracks. She thought of fire, of bulldozers leveling trees and buildings. Why not? [83]

Personality is either fluid, open, at risk – or it solidifies and the person dies. The members of the Wendall family are involved in struggles against external forces – the Depression, poverty, an overcrowded family, violence in the city and in the family – but they are locked in a more important struggle within themselves. At the start of the book Loretta, Maureen's mother, has plunged into immediate trauma:

> …And what is she went crazy? Her mother had gone crazy, screaming her hopeless, mad scream, weeping for hours, for days, lying in her soiled bed, crying that her head was splitting in two…That bastard with his gun had made all this happen…She was sixteen years old. She wondered if she would ever live past that age.[84]

For the rest of her life Loretta withdraws into a cowered materialism, the hope of her beauty and sexuality are battered into cynical submission. Her security becomes defined in terms of stasis. Any change or challenge must be resisted. Yet, her experience of life is nothing but "all these changes, this geography of change" which Loretta simply "could not keep up with."[85]

With Maureen, personal autonomy seems as deterministically defined by material desires as in her mother's life, and her instinctive youthful sense of adventure, "as if she had safely crossed a boundary line"[86] is directed unconsciously towards the kind of material security that have destroyed her mother and which seemingly motivate her brother. When Maureen turns to Jules for affection he offers her money, and, without knowing why, she feels:

> Something was happening, something terrible – she was losing Jules or had already lost him…was losing something or had already lost it.[87]

Like the world around her, she becomes deliberately hard, as if a "shell were shaping itself out of her skin." The money that men give her seems to justify no more intimate connection between people than the violence and degradation which she experiences with her mother and which her brother, too, seems to offer. Oates' story of the Wendalls operates on two interacting levels: one is a story of conflict, tension, and material degradation; the other, continuously interwoven, is a story of spiritual aspiration beyond the suffocating violence and determinism of Detroit. It is Jules who develops most fully into Oates' symbol for this challenge to the stifling despair of America. At one point in the story she stands aside to comment on Jules' typicality. His life, like everyone else's, is a mixture of order and tedium, which is made up of the usual irrelevant or shameful details of life. The real importance of his

story is his spiritual development and he seems to think of himself as searching not for good or evil, but for significance, which arises from the spirit exclusively:

> Pure spirit struggling to break free of the morass of the flesh. He thought of himself as spirit struggling with the fleshy earth, the very force of gravity, death.[88]

This is what motivates him throughout his life.

In the convulsive physical confrontations between Jules and Nadine, Oates pours the book's pent-up passions, as if the violence, anger and aspiration of all of Detroit were focused in the two lovers as they fight with images of each other while groping for some kind of relaxed fulfillment. Making love, vowing eventually to marry, they feel:

> As if the two of them were fated for some final convulsion, locked in each other's arms, their mouths fastened greedily together in a pose neither had really chosen.[89]

Jules is a man who is fated to leap at the impossible and, sometimes, gain it, and all his dreams have been embodied in women – in his grandmother, in his teacher, Sister Mary Jerome, his sister Maureen, and his romanticized, neurotic mistress Nadine. Though they may fail his idealism – his grandmother falls ill, his teacher loses her temper and his sister goes on the street, Nadine abandons him and they nevertheless draw out of him the imaginative vision by which Jules represents the hope of the novel. Making love:

> His mindflashed to him an image of himself and Nadine, entwined together, a woman's long, pale arms lashed about his body, and Jules's strong back

> arched over her, in a grip of death. Hadn't he always put his faith in such bizarre images? [90]

Like Nadine, as they struggle together, he feels that through and not despite, their lacerations and pain, a gravitation toward unity in this fashion would bring him violently through the horizon of Detroit's limitations. Love is like art: "We're in a painting," Jules broods at one point, a painting which:

> Had seemed, then, to hold a secret for him – the way out of Detroit.[91]

With Nadine, he is reminded of the same possibility:

> He had gone beyond himself. He was being in painting, embracing a woman in a painting. Their love, so sweaty and violent at its height, had exploded into a thousand clean glimmering dots and golden leaves. [92]

Love of this intensity develops a hyper-realism that takes it far beyond Jules adolescent daydreaming. While he has a lover's inability to:

> Quiet believe in all this beauty, this beauty, this perfection…He did not think of this woman as someone else's wife and therefore practiced in love, but as the deepest, essential Nadine…He could not remember any other women, was not certain that he had ever done this before.[93]

Each gives the other the overwhelming sense that, as Nadine denotes:

> A man's love creates a woman's love. You've made me the way I am. I'm certain of that.[94]

Then, the typical Oates irony intervenes even as Nadine continues:

> There are men who are permanent in a woman's life, everything in them is permanent, and terrible, nobody thinks about them. That's something I set out to do; there's no choice about it. You love me and I love you, I don't have any choice about it.[95]

The affirmation of their love is through the violence and anger of the city that surrounds them and not despite it – even when Nadine cracks under the pressure and finally tries to shoot Jules in an effort, seemingly, to avoid facing the realities of his permanence for her.

The violent culmination of the second phase of their relationship is brought about because Jules and Nadine have to fight through not only the destructive element of Detroit but through their own inner sickness. Nadine has a passivity before the manipulative pressures of the others which makes her vulnerable and alluring – and which might hide a vacuum, an absence of any real self. She is formed by the brutal affluence of Detroit and its effect in her are brought out in the way Jules experiences something volatile and experimental about her which frightens him. Early in their relationship she fastens on the accidental quality of their meeting, as if such fortuity were commensurate with the unpredictability of a world which justifies her lack of commitment to him. Only through the violence of their encounters can she sense any kind of authenticity, and her attempt to murder Jules is distorted, yet eventually is a purgative acknowledgement of an authentic passion that is invading and re-creating her.

them begins and ends with killing. All three stories are clotted with violence; parental beatings send children to the hospital for months; there are police clubbings, car and airplane crashes, barn burnings, bombings, stabbings. All three characters live for long moments on the chased side of the law, as thieves or prostitutes or rioting revolutionaries. It is a story of the folly and cruelty and, for the poor, the desperate necessity of the American dream of

betterment. The book drills through almost immediately to that nerve of anxiety that forms part of all human beings simply by virtue of their being alive, subject to change, unsafe. And to Americans, especially the Wendalls who are so vulnerable in their self-conceited dreams of the future and who are so prone to defeat that it is a nightmare version of their own fears.

Violence is a condition of society. It is also composed of individual acts which Oates records in her work. However, the fact that violence will remain a part of a larger social network is something that is referred to throughout Oates' reimagination of these violent events. As Creighton observes in connection with Oates' fiction:

> We strike out in order that we may become. In a society where the instincts are so much repressed, violence may become a gesture of liberation, of purging, or self discovery. Indeed, violence seems to be at the heart of the dream of America, as we cultivate the palpable risk, the danger of our deepest desire.[96]

Violence which is omnipresent in Oates' works is more a reflection of the general atmosphere which she feels is more significant in society rather than any cry of victimization. The question of violence in Oates writing is well condensed in Elaine Showalter's "Portrait" of Oates:

> In the 70's Oates work was often criticized for its violent themes and images, for scenes of riots, beating, and murders; and reviewers wondered whether some trauma of her own was responsible for her dark vision. Oates responded in a 1981 essay for the *New York Times Book Review* called 'Why is your writing so Violent?' The question, she wrote, was 'always insulting…always ignorant…always sexist,' a question that would never be asked of a serious male artist.[97]

Oates in one of her letters said that art:

> Must deal consciously with emotions that are… 'unimagined,' not yet rendered into coherent images by most people, and hence "dangerous." [98]

If "all human beings are artists, whether consciously or unconsciously," Oates' characters, as Fossum mentions are "notably unsuccessful artists."[99] James Gilligan describes violent people as having a "verbal inarticulateness" that prevents them from understanding and expressing their motivations and their feelings. He states:

> Their violent actions are a way of saying what they are not capable of saying.[100]

The imagination of Oates' characters are stunted or impoverished by circumstances and they experience few epiphanies and few visions beyond those that are induced by American advertising. Ignorant of the causes of their feelings and actions, they exist in a state of bewilderment. It is a waking dream which is punctuated by moments of restlessness, impotent rage, or violence. Their emotions become, as a result, dangerous indeed. They are emotionally inarticulate and therefore violence becomes the means of self- expression.

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A study of the selected novels of Joyce Carol Oates clearly demonstrates the centrality of violence in the context of America. Oates lives in an era, which insists upon the dominance of fiction over all the other forms of literature. A unique creative genius, she blends reality and vision with great comprehension while trying to locate the fundamental maladies that are related to violence. Unlike many women writers Oates is entirely open to social turmoil and to social havoc and turbulence. She is different in her feeling for the pressure and the mass density of violent American experience that is not known to the professional middle class. Her novels explore the life of the Americans, combining the social analysis and vivid psychological portraits of frustrated characters. Her novels, she says:

> Tells an independent story I consider uniquely American and of our time. The characters are both our ancestors and ourselves.[1]

By depicting psychological realism, social and philosophical realism, she denotes that her aim is:

> To dramatize and thereby "exorcize" our current American nightmares. [2]

Oates is an artist of incomparable power of expression. She is concerned about America and its problems. She intelligently interprets the American loneliness in the multiple planes of their living while decisively touching the American dream and its passion. G.F. Waller observes:

> To live by obsession totally is to go mad, but – at least as Oates articulates it… except through facing and through fiction, reliving our obsessions, we will hardly be able to face the possibility of transcendence that those obsessions

> yearn for. It may be that it is to the source of this transcendence that she will turn in… fiction. [3]

Oates remarks:

> In the novels I have written, I have tried to give shape to certain obsession of mid-century America's confusion of love and money, categories of public and private experience, of a demonic urge, I sense all around me, an urge to self-annihilation, suicide - the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender.[4]

Oates, while describing the mysterious age, endeavors to create it. G.F. Waller remarks:

> Oates' work reveals her to be among the most sensitive recorders of the intellectual, social and most important of all – the emotional dynamics of our times. [5]

Since 1963, Oates has written innumerable novels, short stories, plays, anthologies of poetry and literary criticism, all of which reveal her deep involvement in the work. She states:

> I have laughably a Balzackian ambition to get the whole world into a book. [6]

In 1978, she explained her role as a writer:

> A writer's job ideally, is to art the conscience of his race… I would not be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me. [7]

Oates further adds:

> The aim of a serious, respectful act is to externalize personal, private, shapeless phantansies into structures that are recognizable to over people. [8]

Explaining her deep interest in works of literature and passionately remembering the limitations of the body, spirit and the human condition, Oates remarks:

> I feel my own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my times and to show how some individuals find a way out – awake, come alive, on the future. [9]

In the texts selected for study, Oates depict the social and economic facts of life in America, combined with unusually sensitive – but hopefully representative – young men and women, who confront the puzzle of American life in different ways and come to different ends. Oates has used violence often as a means of communication, a language between the perpetrator of the violence and society. In addition to this, Oates' characters also use violence as a tool to transcend the hopeless situation in which they unwillingly find themselves. Depicting the social reality which is full of America's personal and collective nightmares, she is continually hinting at a transcendence which might lead to a healthier society and eventually a society which would not produce insane and neurotic people. By projecting certain characters that are imbalanced and desperately obsessed, Oates aim is to find out both the causes and solutions for such a human condition. Hannah Arendt deduces:

> Violence inspired by a short-term goal can be rational. The absence of emotions neither causes nor promotes rationality. "Detachment and equanimity" in view of "unbearable tragedy" can indeed be "terrifying." [10]

Arendt warns that with violence there is a danger that the means will overwhelm the end. Oates' characters act without any certainty of the consequences and therefore, often come to tragic end. Her novels namely A Garden of Earthly Delights (1966), Expensive People (1968), them (1969), The Falls (2004) and Black Girl/White Girl (2006) illustrate her intention to expose the situation and to denote the means of ameliorating the inescapable condition. The social and psychological violence that prevails constantly in her works is the result of her obsession with the experience of other people. Violence for Oates has become the outcome of bewilderment and disgust and a terrain of struggle that the mechanized American life seems to offer.

Oates is able to articulate and evoke some vitally important aspects of America's contemporary sensibility. Her stories have emerged as a disturbing and yet exhilarating vision, one that is both fascinated with and appalled by the emotional and spiritual determinism of the age. Oates has felt it to be the writer's calling especially to point towards such awareness, and to call forth the creativity to respond to it. She denotes a fictional stance that may perhaps be symbolized by her personal situation. She is an American citizen, living and working in Windsor, Ontario. From Windsor she can gaze across the Detroit River straight into what she terms the "transparent"[11] heart of her America. She is at once tied to the United States by birth and sentiment while she is afforded at the same time, a perspective of contemplation and judgment. "The border between two narrations," she writes in one of her stories about American immigrants to Canada:

> Is always indicated by broken but definite lines.[12]

Thus boundaries not only serve to separate a person from a situation but also enable that person to understand that situation better. Indeed, her migration to Canada in 1968, seems to have encouraged her fascination with the very dynamics of America from which she is physically separate. Canada is thus as much a state of mind as America; it is the perspective of a writer who is compelled to write about the experience of being overwhelmed (or nearly overwhelmed) by America, without being overwhelmed in her own person.

Reflecting upon Oates' fiction as a whole, the reader is struck by the manner in which places, physical surroundings, and everyday personal details are denoted. Paradoxically, the spirit of America is characteristically made accessible through the very opposite of the spiritual – in terms of the repeated bombardment by an obsessed concentration on detail. For Oates, a peculiarity of contemporary American experience is that, insight seems to

overwhelmingly arise through paradox, contraries, and extremity of feeling. Confrontations of dream and reality, spirit and material, therefore dominate her fiction. In the sudden eruption of violence, through discoveries or shattered expectations bordering on the insane or absurd, by vivid juxtapositions of nature and mechanism, the reader discovers ways of transcending the bondage to self and the world. Crossing borders there are instances where identity is lost, dissolved and unrecognizable even at the risk of disintegration. Oates forces the reader to confront the boundaries of the known and comforting experiences.

In Oatesian narrative, she devises a rhetoric of violence to direct the readers to the highly volatile, nightmarish undercurrents of the psyche, which makes everyone aware of the dislocations and disasters in lives. There are characters in her stories – Maureen and Jules in them, Gemma in Black Girl White Girl and Ariah in The Falls who have survived an unpredictable and absurd set of crises and struggles. They have pursued an obsession, often in terms of violence and have triumphed. Violence that always erupted through the surface of Oates' America exists in part as an acknowledgement of the omnipresence of the struggle, crime and chaos in the society. Oates' fiction affirms that man is located in a universe that can be either transcended or controlled and from which there is no separation or redemption. Her frequently remarked tendency to focus upon psychological terror and imbalance thus relates directly to her vision of America and she has insisted that her violent materials accurately mirror the psychological and social convulsions of the present time. In the selected novels, there are notable elements of psychological and social violence and they feature aspects of explicit violence which depict the psychological afflictions and obsessions.

Oates is a 'social novelist' of a peculiar kind. She is concerned not with demonstrating power relationships but with the struggle of people to express their fate in terms that are cruelly changeable. Through her art, Oates conveys the real tragedy of many

Americans who are unable to find a language for what is happening to them. In her work Oates dramatizes the chaos, violence and other nightmares of America. Her aim, she states:

> Is to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future. [13]

The drama of society was once depicted by American social novelists as the shifting line between the individual and the mass into which the individual was helplessly falling. In the American social novels that were written earlier in the century, the novelist was a pathfinder and the characters were portrayed as blind helpless victims of their fate. Oates is not particularly ahead of the people that she writes about. Since her prime concern is to locate people in the terms that they present to themselves, she is able to present consciousness as a person and seemingly inexplicable phenomena. The human mind, as she depicts in the title of her novel Wonderland (1971), is simply "wonderland." However, the significance of that "wonderland" to the social melodrama that is America today is that they collide but do not connect. Praising Harriet Arnow's novel The Dollmaker, Oates states:

> It seems to me that the greatest works of literature deal with the human soul caught in the stampede of time, unable to gauge the profundity of what passes over it, like the characters of Yeats who live through terrifying events but who cannot understand them; in this way history passes over most of us. Society is caught in a convulsion, whether of growth or of death, and ordinary people are destroyed. They do not, however, understand that they are "destroyed". [14]

This research has also revealed that Oates is always concerned with the larger social, political and moral implications of her characters': The people whom she chooses for her subject represent American society in miniature. In her letter she writes:

> In my fiction, the troubled people are precisely those who yearn for a higher life – those in whom the life-form itself is stirring. By singling out individuals who are representatives of our society who, as people, interest me very much. I attempt to submerge myself in that foreign personality and see how and why and to what end the behavoir that people call 'anti-social' or 'neurotic' is actually functioning. And it is always my discovery that these people are genuinely superior to the role in life, the social station, the economic level, the marriage, the job, the philosophical beliefs, etc., in which they find themselves. They must have liberation, room to grow in. If they don't get it, they become violent or self-destructive or apathetic, and sink back to an earlier level of existence. They are not sick, but normal – it is normal to grow, and continue to grow, and a society that does not allow for this fact of life will always be plagued by neuroses. On the other hand, the apparently well-adapted human being, who is content with whatever he has in life, with his job, his marriage, his prospects, is a person who has come to the end of his personal development, and will not have to struggle any longer. [15]

It is the restless who interest Oates, for only out of restlessness can higher personalities emerge, just as, in a social context, it is only out of occasional surprises and upheavals that new ways of life can emerge. By running free from the bonds of the family, society and history, Oates' characters do not find the freedom they pursue. Such freedom is merely an illusion which lead only to alienation and isolation and also to violence. Oates' characters are

repeatedly defeated by the reality of life. Survival for them becomes possible only by realizing their own limitations and the confines of the society. The much recurring violence in her works is the outcome of the frustrations and disgust that the mechanized America seems to offer. Oates' characters are living in a world of accumulated violence, distorted energy, and thirsting egos so that violence which may be even apparently random, becomes seemingly the inevitable outcome. The view of literature as silent tragedy is a central description of what interests Oates in the writing of fiction. Her characters move through a world that seems to be wholly physical and even full of global eruption. However, the violence, as Elizabeth Dalton denotes, is in their own heads – and is no less real for that. They live through terrifying events but these events cannot be understood by them.

A Garden of Earthly Delights begins with the birth on the highway of a migrant worker's child after the truck which has been transporting the workers has met with a collision. Oates is unlike many women writers in her feeling for the pressure, mass and density of violence in American experience which is not always shared by the professional middle class. "The greatest realities," she says, "are physical and economic; all the subtleties of life come afterward." [16] Yet the central concern in her work is the teeming private consciousness, a "wonderland" that to her is reality in action – but without definitions and without boundaries. In the novel, Oates uses violence profusely as symbolic of American society's psychological turmoil.

In Expensive People Oates gets behind the surface of American society as she explores the unpredictable absurdities and violence. " No story is really fiction," she says:

> The aim of a serious, respectful art is to externalize personal, private, shapeless fantasies into structures that are recognizable to other people. [17]

What the novel shapes into recognition is the self-consciousness that has, both historically and mythically created the America which it reflects. For Richard, killing is a quest for his freedom:

> Again I squeezed the trigger, aiming not at Mr. Body but at the wall behind him. Another shot. Mr. Body's newspaper was scattered about him, and his big fragile head was bent to the floor as if he were about to burrow into it. I pulled the trigger again and yet again. My Body lay very still, playing dead…and again I squeezed the trigger…I slept well that night; it seemed to me that at last I had discovered myself.[18]

However, Oates portrays Richard as an idealist who cannot accommodate himself to reality as well. As the child who claims the right to his mother's love, the character of Richard criticizes the striving for freedom, but he is also a character who desperately wants to capture and hold the romantic ideal that Nada represents to him. Richard is Oates 'deluded romantic.' What the novel shapes into recognition is the inherent self consciousness that has both historically and mythically created the America which has sought to reflect.

The social violence which is so marked in Oates' work is like the sheer density of detail. She is attached to life by the well- founded apprehension that, "nothing lasts, nothing is safe, nothing is all around us." In them she creates a violent, indeed apocalyptic world, one that seems at times in the final stages of disintegration. Joanne Leedon writes:

> The quest in them is for rebirth: the means is violence; the end is merely a realignment of patterns.[19]

One of the apocalyptic eruptions which surfaces in this novel, the 'riot,' is started by university students who are venting personal frustrations under the guise of an ideological revolution. Jules shares their frustrations but not their self-deception. His vision of, "some clearing in the midst of the cities."[20] Temporarily replaced by the actuality of excavation sites and dead-end streets, the riot reawakens the:

> Violence that had become his…emergency instinct.[21]

In the novel, Oates depicts not only the pervasiveness of materialism and violence in Detroit's and America's social fabric but it also evokes in the reader the pervasiveness and brutality of the basic human drives. She writes not only about "them" but about the feelings of the American as a whole.

In The Falls, Oates recreates another tragedy which is typical of many Americans. Ariah 'the widow bride of the fall' sits on the brink of madness, listlessly waiting for something to happen even after her second marriage. Eventually, her nightmare is manifested when Dirk is killed in a set-up car accident. As in many of Oates' narratives, the denouement of violence occurs in this novel with a frightening emotional logic. The characters live in fear of the inner landscape of their psychic and physical existence.

Black Girl/ White Girl is searing in its rendering of the treatment of a black girl in Schuyler College. Genna, a white girl begins an official enquiry into the traumatic events that occurred in her college, fifteen years ago:

> I had not wanted Minette to know. I did not want her to be hurt. I did not want her to recoil in anger, disgust. I did not want her to think *white racism*. I did

> not want to suddenly discover myself, as in a nightmare of reversals, made by Minette into one of the white enemy…I would wonder if the act hadn't been purely personal, aimed against Minette Swift as an individual, and not "racist." Yet how swiftly and crudely the personal becomes the racial! As if, beneath ordinary hatred, there is a deeper, more virulent and deadly racial hatred to be tapped.[22]

As in Oates' other novels, acts of emotional as well as physical violence proliferates throughout the text.

Joyce Carol Oates is not known for writing happy endings. "Our past may weight heavily upon us," Oates writes in an afterword to her Gothic masterpiece, Bellefleur, "but it cannot contain us, let alone shape our future." she admits that her imagination:

> Seems to turn instinctively toward the central, centralizing act of violence.[23]

In fact, she points out that such violence generally "seems to symbolize something beyond itself. Like a lightning flash illuminating part of a culture or an era." She also questions as to whether her writing are unduly violent: to her mind, she is simply presenting the moral and social conditions of America. "Most of my novels and stories," she told an interviewer, "are explorations of the contemporary world which are interpreted in a realist mode, from what might be called a tragic and humanistic viewpoint." Through her art, Oates conveys the real tragedy of many Americans who are unable to find a language for what is happening to them. Oates has observed and evoked the tragic irony of the dislocations between dream and materialism in America. Her novels are concentrated upon the similar struggle of the personality to define itself in a world where dream, ideal, and striving are constantly and

brutally materialized. “The impulse to ‘make well’ may be the most sinister of Western civilization’s goals,”[24] Oates suggests. In one of her interviews she states:

> All of my writing is about the mystery of human emotions, and I am concerned with only one thing...the moral and social conditions of my generation. [25]

As mentioned at the outset of the research, the thematic concern of the study has been focused upon the aspect of violence and thus the research concluded that the violence in real life America is no different from the violence that has been incorporated in Oates’ works. In fact, Oates’ works can be interpreted in a certain sense, as a classic example of art imitating life. Through her art, Oates exposes the ubiquitous presence of violence in human affairs and how to make sense of the violent context of the social reality. In the Oatesian narrative, violence, which Hannah Arendt terms ‘instrumental,’ therefore becomes inherent and inescapable. The study concludes that in all the five texts selected for study, Oates portrays characters that are molded by society or by their own emotional environments into obsessive beings for whom violence has become the only means of communication and self-expression.

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LOCATING VIOLENCE:

A STUDY OF SELECT NOVELS BY

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Ramdinthari

Department of English

Submitted

In partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl.

DECLARATION

Mizoram University

August 2011

I, Ramdinthari, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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During the course of the research I visited various libraries and centers of research including: American Center, Kolkata and New Delhi; Jadavpur University Library, Kolkata; British Council, New Delhi; Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi; Delhi University Library, North and South Campus; Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Hyderabad Central University Library; The English and Foreign Language University (TEFLU), Hyderabad; Osmania University Centre for International Programme (earlier American Studies Research Centre), Hyderabad and Anveshi Library, Hyderabad. I thank the faculty and staffs of these institutions for helping me source the materials I required during the course of the research.

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Appendices

Bio-data

APPENDICES

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CHAPTER –I

JOYCE CAROL OATES AND THE DIMENSION OF VIOLENCE

CHAPTER –II

VIOLENCE AND ITS AFTERLIVES

CHAPTER –III

FAMILY: THE TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

CHAPTER –IV

VIOLENCE AS SELF-EXPRESSION

CHAPTER –V

CONCLUSION

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that "Locating Violence: A Study of Select Novels by Joyce Carol Oates" written by Ramdinthari has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down under the Ph. D. Regulations of Mizoram University. The thesis is the result of her own investigation. Neither the thesis as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted to any other University for any research degree.

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