Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies

Volume 1 Article 3

2014

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Intense passion often leads to desperate behavior in several stories included in the new Joyce Carol Oates collection *Lovely, Dark, Deep*.

One of the most intense and hallucinatory narratives, "Distance," describes how a woman named Kathryn has crossed the country in an attempt to wean herself from her addiction to loving a man. Her range of self-deception and self-destructive behavior is seemingly boundless as she attempts to contact him in a manic frenzy. This heated inner-psychological drama directed at a seemingly anonymous person shows how the expression of love can often make more of a statement about the individual than about the object of affection. It also shows how vulnerable one is made by loving as is described in the story "'Stephanos is Dead'" which acknowledges, "So risky, to love another person! Like flaying your own, outermost skin. Exposed to the crude air and every kind of infection." Part of the reason one is made so fragile by admitting to love another person is that you might not be loved in return or that the one who is loved might stop loving you as much. This is a dilemma addressed in many stories in Oates's earlier short story collections such as *The Wheel of Love* (1970), *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972), and *Will You Always Love Me?* (1996), and this question is explored further in the story "The Disappearing" where a woman grows increasingly paranoid her husband is having an affair. Here she is aware that "If marriage is a masquerade, there is the very real danger that masks may slip." She longs for total candor, but cannot give the trust necessary for a long term relationship to really function.

The notion that finding a stable mate can ensure an individual's peace and security in life is demystified in stories such as "Mastiff," "The Jesters," and "Betrayal." Even happy couples must acknowledge the terrible fact that one of the pair will die at some point before the other. In "Mastiff," an unnamed man and woman who are on a hike encounter a ferocious animal that symbolizes the looming specter of death. Also, the promise of marriage or life-long fidelity is a quixotic state of being for many couples. The long-term conviviality of

togetherness jostles against the inescapable state of continuing to be individuals. No two minds (however in-tune with each other) are privy to one another's thoughts. An individual always remains existentially alone. This understanding is summed up in this melancholy line from "The Jesters," "Much of his life was separate from hers as if each was on an ice floe, drifting in the same direction and yet drifting inevitably apart." In this story a couple find their peaceful suburban existence disrupted by troubling noise from nearby neighbors, but whose house is located on an entirely different street which is difficult to access. Once they drive to the house in question they are startled to discover it's architecturally a mirror image to their own. Oates always has a striking ability to write about twins (as exemplified in her Rosamond Smith novels). Here the physical duplication of homes where one is calmly ordered and the other is a chaotic, burnt-out, abandoned shell hints at the unvoiced dissatisfactions in the couple's relationship.

A persistent theme in much of Oates's writing has been the distillation of the Darwinian notion of "survival of the fittest" and its ramifications for the individual. In "Betrayal" the central couple who narrate the story have triumphed and survived together, leading them to produce a son who they've supported during all his expensive education in the hope that he will thrive and continue their legacy. That the husband and wife aren't named and are only ever referred to separately as either "Father" or "Mother" shows that their individual identities have been subsumed by the roles they've taken on as parents. The story is narrated in the first-person-plural which reinforces the notion that as a unified entity they should be able to more triumphantly overcome the adversities of life. However, their son chooses to not survive and continue the species. Rather, in this narrative which slides towards the hallucinatory and the absurd, he chooses to not find a permanent well-paid job and appears instead to regress into a form of species more primitive than humans. In doing so, the son betrays not only his parents but all Homo sapiens! Oates has previous played with the notion of a backwards continuation of the species in her story "Poe Posthumous; Or, The Light-House" from the collection *Wild Nights!* (2008) where her fictionalized version of Edgar Allan Poe attempts to mate with a primitive sea creature. In "Betrayal," Oates also engages with the economic strain felt in present-day America where a well-educated new generation is struggling to find suitably gainful employment. The story questions the popular belief in our capitalist society that earning as much money as one can necessarily means one's "survival" is more assured.

If it seems no common ground can be found between two different generations in "Betrayal," a more peaceful coexistence is established between a boy and his grandmother in the story "Sex with Camel." The bond between the two is presented through dialogue which feels very realistic and movingly familiar. A contrast is drawn between the boy and grandmother's approach to

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.1.3

individual survival where the grandmother battles against infirmity brought on by old age and the teenage boy grapples with the gravitational draw of suicide. Oates convincingly portrays an easily-distracted youth who feels compelled to persistently check his smartphone given that "Other things felt boring, or old." While the story shows that there may be tremendous gaps in knowledge and beliefs between two individuals, the characters find that humor and companionship can triumph over an obsessive awareness of one's own mortality.

It's a strategy for getting through life not available to jaded and rejected Mickey in "'Stephanos is Dead'" where she starkly opines, "No one knows what to make of death. Never did and never will." Here the protagonist has been struggling with cancer, but she has not allowed this to become general knowledge. She overhears people from her community discussing the sudden death of a much loved man who Mickey may have had an intimate relationship with. Her feelings of isolation and sense of her own anonymity seem excruciating when pitted against the overwhelming praise and love expressed in sympathy for the loss of Stephanos. It draws one to question why some people are so revered and valued while others are ignored and forgotten. Where Stephanos is seemingly deified by the tragedy of his death, Mickey is perversely persecuted by her stubborn persistence in surviving. It's understandable that sympathy doesn't naturally flow out towards Mickey because of her inhibited nature, but it points to another prevalent theme in Oates's writing of giving a voice to people who are frequently misunderstood or ignored.

Two characters that have been permanently silenced through their deaths are granted a voice in the stories "Forked River Roadside Shrine, South Jersey" and "Things Passed on the Way to Oblivion." An aggressive eighteen-year-old male teenager is the posthumous narrator of "Forked River Roadside Shrine, South Jersey." He is prone to masculine fits of uncontrollable anger which are "like a hot flame running through my veins." Yet, he displays a subtlety of emotion and understanding of human relations which no one would guess judging him by his boisterous behavior. Equally in "Things Passed on the Way to Oblivion," bi-racial Leanda is judged as being a certain type of person from her appearance and the tattoos she's acquired. In this story her death is seemingly dismissed by a mounting chorus of voices. As the unacknowledged illegitimate daughter of a revered photographer, she may have assisted him in his work, but she's quickly forgotten. It touches upon another common thread which ties some of the stories in this collection together—the ego of famous artists and those close to them.

This is a theme pursued most assiduously in "Patricide," the longest story in the collection, which is narrated from the perspective of the daughter (nicknamed Lou-Lou) of Nobel prize-winning author Roland Marks. She devotes herself totally to assisting her father in the hope of becoming his most trusted

relation, and stymies any potential of her own in favor of bolstering his apparent genius. She suffers through a succession of his wives who afterwards bring lawsuits against the great author. Lou-Lou is not blind to his flaws, yet the cult of celebrity drives her to revere Roland over others including the precocious and attractive young woman who comes to work as his new assistant. The gender dynamic of devotee and famed author is reversed in the fascinating story "The Hunter" which centers upon Violet N___ who explains, "in the tradition of Emily Dickinson, I was a *half-crack'd Poetess*." She accepts an invitation to teach in a two-week residency at a small college from the institution's president Rob Flint who is a fan of her work. Although the narrator of "Patricide" secretly longs to be a participant in her father's death, Violet conversely wishes to escape altogether her own father's severe ill health and impending death by taking on this residency and playing into the designs of Flint to have her as a lover/conquest. By perversely participating in the adulation which accompanies her own smaller-scale celebrity she seeks to escape her identity as a daughter. But she understands that this is something she will always be, as she acknowledges in this chilling analogy: "Like the eyeball of a fetal twin absorbed in the mother's womb before birth, preserved in the fatty tissue beneath the heart, or in the bowels, or in the brain. All our former selves remain inside us, embryonic."

In addition to exploring the distinction between artists' essential selves and their public identities in these stories about fictional writers, it's fascinating to see the way Oates continues to fictionally explore the vicissitudes of real authors' lives in other stories. She did so in a sustained way writing about Poe, Dickinson, Twain, Hemingway, and James in her aforementioned collection *Wild Nights!* Her choice to write about Robert Frost in the title story "Lovely, Dark, Deep" proved to be a controversial one when it first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* and received fierce criticism from some descendants and biographers of Frost. In the story a (fictional) interviewer travels to Frost's remote Vermont "Poet's cabin" at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in 1951. While she at first appears to be a victim ripe for exploitation by the famed writer who teases her about her panties growing wet after sitting on a damp chair, she gradually turns into a prosecutor of his soul, skewering him with questions about the regrets in his life that haunt him the most. She is after his heart: "My next question was a sharp little blade, to be inserted into the fatty flesh of the poet, between the ribs." Her relentlessly malicious attack creates a shift in the reader's sympathy towards a man who existed in the public imagination like a mythic scribe and here is turned back into a real man cowering before the demons that plague him. It could be argued that Oates is perpetuating unsubstantiated rumors about a real man in her fiction. It could be argued that Oates is honoring a great writer by portraying him as a vulnerable man prone to the severest forms of self-criticism. It could be argued that Oates is calling us to question our own perverse desire to expose and wallow

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in the most salacious personal details about the people we respect the most. Reading "Lovely, Dark, Deep" and every story in this diverse collection is a challenging experience.

The stories are as mesmerizing as they are terrifying, drawing the reader into the complex psychological experience of every subject they touch upon. This collection demonstrates how Oates continues to push boundaries in her short fiction and tread in dangerous territory. From the surreal, disturbing, Lynchian landscape of "The Jesters" to the stark, hard reality of an abortion clinic in "A Book of Martyrs," Oates marries the style of each narrative to the subjects she investigates. This is not the work of a writer resting on her laurels or trying to capitalize on the sensational; each story in *Lovely, Dark, Deep* engages, provokes, and transforms the reader by creating an intelligent and atmospherically immersive experience.