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Review of *The Sacrifice*



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Given the recent much-publicized protests in America about a series of unjustified killings of black individuals at the hands of white policemen, the subject of *The Sacrifice* couldn't appear any more prescient. Yet, what Oates shows in her novel is that fear, ignorance and misunderstanding is a constant presence, and is the legacy of racial tension in American society carried throughout the years and multiple generations. The media highlights particular examples of the issue regularly, and this sparks movements of public outcry and protest seeking to gain justice and correct societal imbalances. *The Sacrifice* traces the way incidents like this transition from the particular to the emblematic; how people at the centre of the incident are turned from individuals into symbols and are made to surrender their unique complexities as human beings; and how facts can be obfuscated for the sake of a "bigger meaning" or to progress personal agendas. Oates has created a gripping, complex story largely inspired by the case of Tawana Brawley, a black teenage girl who was found by a grand jury to have falsely accused six white men of raping her. *The Sacrifice* memorializes the conflicts, both internal and external, of individuals whose subjective reality is subsumed by their public identity within a movement of social change.

The novel begins with a black woman named Ednetta Frye frantically searching for her daughter Sybilla who has been missing for a few days. The response from the general public is of mild alarm, but overall indifference. She is finally discovered in an abandoned factory by a sympathetic teacher bound, beaten and with racial slurs scrawled across her chest. Sybilla gives few facts about the incident except that her attackers were white and one had a police badge. While her case is not thoroughly pursued at first, largely because Ednetta and Sybilla do not want to engage with any investigation, it is eventually taken up by two brothers: Reverend Marus Mudrick and lawyer Byron Mudrick. With tactical aplomb, Marus brings Sybilla to public attention as a victim of how the white police force preys upon and abuses the black public. Marus states: "You, Sybilla, are a race victim, a martyr, and a sacrifice. But you will be our saint—our

Joan of Arc.” He is also personally motivated by political ambitions and financial gain, the latter of which convinces the Fries to be represented by these charismatic brothers. When public awareness of Sybilla’s case is raised by the media, the anonymous girl who no one cared about at the novel’s start becomes the center of a national scandal. Financial donations flood in and celebrities voice their support for Sybilla including a touching appearance from Mike Tyson (Oates has written extensively on Tyson’s boxing career). As the public case unravels, hidden motivations are revealed, undermining the cause for which the public is rallying.

This new novel has a natural predecessor in Oates’s National Book Award-winning novel *them* (1969). In this earlier novel the struggles of a lower-middle class family are seen as running parallel to and becoming entangled with the 1967 Detroit race riots. Even in her preface for *them* there is an understanding of how specific incidents of racial conflict cannot be viewed only in isolation but are a part of an inherited opposition between social groups. Oates noted: “the genesis of these specific acts of violence lay far in the past and were certainly not limited to one troubled city.” *The Sacrifice* directly references this time period when Sybilla’s mother refuses to cooperate with the police in the investigation of her daughter’s assault: “Ednetta was remembering the martial law days and nights of August 1967 when SWAT teams stormed Red Rock houses in a hail of bullets or threw tear gas containers or firebombs into dwellings like this in a pretext of ‘neutralizing’ sniper fire.” Her historical knowledge about the way the police can abuse their power against people of color creates an ingrained mistrust whereby she believes no worthwhile assistance or justice can be gained by working with any member of the police force. Regardless of the color of their skin, the police are a suspicious “other.”

Positioned between the police and the population who harbors an inherited mistrust of them is officer Iglesias, a good-intentioned Latino woman chosen to take on the police case because, as Iglesias jokes, in the eyes of her superiors she is considered black enough. Although Ednetta initially relents to Iglesias’s pleas to cooperate, she soon withdraws stating: “Nah I’m thinking we better be goin. Talkin with you aint worked out like I hoped, see, ma’am, you one of *them*.” The striking power of the italicized word “*them*” has particular resonance because it recalls the positions of social groups who see themselves in opposition to each other from Oates’s earlier novel of that title, and it positions the reader in the stance of the oppressed black people who cannot trust the police. Iglesias struggles with feelings about how to define her identity as she is viewed as a figure of suspicion both by the police force who sees her as “non-white” and the victims she wants to protect who see her as “white.” The narrative relates her thoughts in italics: “*I am one of you, not one of them. Believe me!*” When Sybilla’s case comes under close public scrutiny the police are quick to blame the

lack of investigation on Iglesias. She is also a figure of sacrifice. Iglesias attends a rally organized by Reverend Marus which devolves into a spontaneous protest that goes awry. Caught in the fray, she is ultimately locked out of both social groups.

The Mudrick brothers are a fascinating pair of characters whose struggle with issues of individual identity around their being twins is a subject Oates has touched upon in multiple previous books, most notably in her psychological suspense novels written under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith. Oates writes: “sometimes it happens, more often than a surviving twin would wish to think, that the larger fetus drains life from the smaller, and sucks the smaller being into itself to lodge like a secret tumor in some region of the chest, the gut, the skull.” This is significant to the narrative because, aside from describing the physical condition which sometimes occurs in the womb, it suggests the way in which highly-intelligent lawyer Byron is drawn into ceding to the will of his persuasive brother Reverend Marus who has betrayed him before and leads him into trouble again over the course of the story. Marus is shown to be a man with many prejudices of his own, particularly against other religious segments of society, but his insecurity might spring out of a denial of who he really is as it’s suggested when he sustains an attack that he might be a closeted homosexual. Although each brother is fascinatingly nuanced, Marus’s manipulative actions lead to their joint downfall and they are grouped together as a villainous pair by the media which had initially aligned with their cause.

Marus considers the media to be a white domain and a tool whose use within the battle for racial equality has changed as the movement has changed. When trying to convince the Fries to take him on as their representative he states: “The 1960s were a time of struggle that is—in some quarters—past; in 1987, in confronting the enemy, we will use a different strategy. Yes—one day soon we may march—we may ‘demonstrate’ in the streets—but initially, we will use white weapons against the white enemy—the *media*.” The direct action and physical protest from that earlier era has been overtaken by press conferences, interviews and talk shows.

The media which Marus tries to play upon to draw public sympathy is something which the brothers attempt to keep Sybilla herself away from. She’s only presented to the media in carefully orchestrated ways and rarely given the chance to even speak. Sybilla is encouraged to not read articles or watch television reports about her case: “Byron Mudrick had promised—*Don’t even try to listen, what will be said. By them and by me. These are tactics of law. The Enemy has no defences. The Enemy is flummoxed. And that means fucked.*” It’s as if Sybilla, the individual, is abstracted entirely from the case which is supposedly all about her attack and welfare. Eventually the truth of her experience is so far removed from what’s being said about her that it’s observed at one point when

she's being interviewed "Deep inside, she wasn't even there." The only glimpses of Sybilla's true internal life are revealed in rare moments with her close cousin or privately with her mother when she's shown to be dream-filled, surly and somewhat cynical. In other words, a typical teenager. Because this inner life is given no outlet for expression, after her break from the Mudrick brothers she's quickly convinced to join a militant sect of Muslims who have broken away from the mainstream Islamic faith. Yet again, she is used as an instrument by them to advance their leader's agenda.

A figure who is really at the crux of this narrative is Sybilla's step-father Anis. His temper leads Ednetta to conceal from him much of what happens, and he's kept completely aside throughout the girl's ordeal. Anis is deeply flawed and stridently masculine as well as prone to extreme violence and alcohol abuse (probably used at times to dull his painful, untreated medical condition). He also suffers continuous indignities at the hands of white police officers, but like innumerable black men in America he has no platform to protest the multitude of racist acts which undermine his humanity. Downtrodden and haunted by a need to avenge his relatives who were victims of white oppression, Anis becomes a horrific personification of that fear which drives white police officers to wield their power so repressively.

Throughout *The Sacrifice*, Anis and Sybilla's different journeys run in parallel as examples of black Americans who have inherited a legacy of racism and whose individual identities are subsumed by larger causes. Sybilla becomes a symbol to provoke white guilt for the Mudrick brothers' personal gain. Anis will no doubt become a symbol of why aggressive police force is necessary. Near the beginning of the novel it's cryptically written that "racism is an evil except when it benefits *us*." This italicised "*us*" is the collective group in diametric opposition to "*them*." It's the creation of an artificial division out of self-interest whereby one person's life is believed to matter more than another's. By presenting a searing portrait of racial politics in contemporary America *The Sacrifice* shows how everyone has the capacity to do this.