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The Awkward Academic: Why Judith Reads James in Joyce Carol Oates's "My Warszawa: 1980"



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Joyce Carol Oates's short story "My Warszawa: 1980" follows the journey of well-respected academician Judith Horne as she travels to and within Poland to participate in an international conference on American culture. She has a vague connection to Poland, with remote family members who were killed in Auschwitz and a Jewish ancestry that can be seen in her features, but she considers these facts unimportant to who she is at the moment. She travels with her lover, who is as remote emotionally as her dead forbears are physically. The emotional connections she makes with the people and land begin to affect her well-ordered and controlled life, including her relationship with him. As they sit side by side on the plane to Poland, he attends to his work as journalist, typewriter on his lap, and Judith gazes at the landscape, an opened book on hers. It is Henry James's *The Awkward Age*, unread, chosen by Judith with a logic she cannot recall. Why does Oates give James to Judith, and why does she choose this novel in particular to influence her? James's protagonist Nanda's story is a warning to Judith, a red flag that unfolds as the younger girl's ruin proceeds before her eyes, and Judith realizes that the man she loves will never marry her, just as the man Nanda awaits, Vanderbank, refuses to propose to Nanda. Neither man is comfortable with a woman who is corrupted by knowledge that might undermine his need for authority in the relationship. Nanda understands her position too late, but Judith has time to reflect on her situation, and Oates leaves the story unresolved, with Judith on a plane home with Carl but not definitively resigned to the relationship.

In 1980, Oates and her husband completed a six-week government sponsored tour of Eastern Europe that included a demanding schedule of sixteen

public appearances. The notes she took during this trip became several of the short stories that comprise the collection *Last Days* (1984), including “My Warszawa: 1980,” which was originally published in *The Kenyon Review* in the fall of 1981 and was an O. Henry Prize Story in 1983. Biographer Greg Johnson mentions the awareness of her own Jewish heritage that began to affect Oates during this visit (*Invisible* 298), so it is clear that Judith’s experience is based on that of Oates. In *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*, he also suggests that Judith “might be considered Oates’s own alter ego” (194). Oates, however, does not document a breakdown or anything close to a breakdown during her travels, although she does lament the need to perform and the stress that comes with performance—a lethargy that affects Judith’s experience as well.

James’s documented influence on Oates makes his work obvious reading material for a character similar to her. Oates rewrote James’s *The Turn of the Screw* twice: “The Turn of the Screw” in 1971 and “The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly” in 1993, and she said of her first version that it is a “testament of my love and extreme devotion” to the original author (Bellamy 17). Oates’s 1972 short story “The Sacred Marriage” is clearly a revision of James’s *The Aspern Papers*, and Christopher Newman of James’s *The American*, she reveals, influenced the characters in *Bellefleur*. Brenda Daly addresses how the stories in *Last Days* share a focus on gender inequality, specifically how Judith views herself as “womanly—in the worst sense of the word,” and how that limits her freedom. Ellen Friedman notes the loss of innocence Judith and Nanda share, focusing on the identity crisis brought about by Judith’s acceptance of her family history, while Jane M. Barstow indicates that “it is as if [Judith] has regressed to an adolescent stage” and as such, the author “associates [Judith’s emotions] with Judith’s reading of Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*.” Judith with James makes sense, as *The Awkward Age* reflects and informs Judith’s personal situation.

In “My Warszawa: 1980,” Judith travels to Poland to complete a ten-day lecture tour on contemporary American culture. She is respected and courted by the Polish writers and students who see her as a savior amidst the Polish government’s restrictions on their own work. Everyone thinks she is severe and unemotional, and “persons—almost always men” are “bitterly jealous of her reputation” (433). Judith fulfills her obligations as expected, but along the way becomes disillusioned with her relationship with Carl, who has been her lover for ten years, or, Judith considers, maybe twelve. He accompanies her but is preoccupied with his own work and does not attend her lectures. He is not too busy, however, to tell her how she should behave or how she should feel. She is unable to confide in him her upset over the destruction of the Polish Jews during the Holocaust or of her growing emotional attachment to her guides and the land itself, although she makes several attempts to do so. He accuses her of becoming “unbalanced” and sentimental about the past, and their arguments lead her to

realize the distance that has always existed between them. His refusal to commit to her is her primary concern, and she feels like she has waited all those years for nothing. Unlike her second revision of *The Turn of the Screw*, “The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly,” in which Oates aims to find a conclusion to the original, this story is left unresolved, and Judith’s decision regarding her relationship with Carl remains a mystery.

Judith and Nanda are haunted, in a sense, by ancestors they have never met, both to their benefit and detriment. Weeks before the trip, Carl wonders if Judith will be upset by a visit to Warsaw. She is immediately offended: “as if she were Jewish—a Jewess!” (436). Her ancestry becomes an issue of blood and guilt, one she has no time to consider, as she does not believe herself religious. Her Polish hosts, however, are fascinated by her Jewish appearance (kinky hair; dark, uneasy eyes) and her Biblical Hebrew name. Her family history is visible to others and an influence on their behavior towards her, in much the same way that Nanda’s physical resemblance to her grandmother, Lady Julia, affects Longdon’s treatment of her. Nanda has never known Lady Julia, but without the affection Longdon remembers for her grandmother, Nanda would not have the opportunity he provides for her when Vanderbank rejects her. Both women inherit acceptance among those who revere their predecessors, Judith with the Poles and Nanda with Longdon, but the men they love remain disinterested. In Nanda’s case, the social ideals set in her grandmother’s time are those to which Vanderbank holds her, so Judith, reading about Nanda’s unknowing failure to adhere to outdated standards, considers that her family history might not be something that would enhance her relationship with Carl. She downplays the effect her connections with the Holocaust have on her, and does not feel comfortable confiding her feelings about it to him.

Judith and Nanda choose reading material that undermines their romantic (or potentially romantic) relationships. Nanda admits to reading a racy French novel that Vanderbank has left at her home, and Judith reads *The Awkward Age* at night in the hotel room she shares with Carl. One evening when he is out at a meeting, she is alone with her book, considering her future. She realizes that she has “fastened her thoughts helplessly” (454) on a man who does not love her in return. She is “humiliated by her love for him” (449). Nanda does the same, reserving her affections for Vanderbank, who ultimately leaves her waiting for a marriage proposal that he will never offer. Carl questions Judith about the book, and comments that James is “heartbreaking” if you read him “correctly” (461). When she assures him that she reads most books “correctly” he agrees, adding sarcastic remarks about her superior intelligence, calling her “the queen” and the “star of the conference.” He is obviously jealous of her success, and Judith tries to discuss this with him. He walks away as she insists, “you *are* jealous. *Don’t deny*

it" (469). Like Vanderbank, he is threatened by a woman whose knowledge is equal or superior to his own.

Vanderbank makes a point of telling Nanda that her mother is a "fixed star," and that her "intelligence . . . will always have a price" (385). Carl's notion of reading this particular novel "correctly" implies that he has read it and is concerned that she understands Nanda's loss as a direct result of her intelligence. Nanda's loss of Vanderbank and the possibility of marriage and motherhood in general is heartbreaking if that is what a reader believes a woman needs to be happy. Her knowledge has led to this downfall, so that same reader would necessarily agree that knowledge ruins innocence, is a threat to male authority, and a barrier to a woman's happiness. Judith's "correct" reading of the novel means something very different than Carl's. She is "poisoned" by the story much like Nanda is ruined by reading Vanderbank's dirty French novel. While Nanda's reading material makes her unfit for Vanderbank, Judith's makes Carl unfit for her. The social knowledge provided by their books, in both cases, allows the women to see other options for their futures, although those futures will not include the romantic marriages they want and expect because the partners they prefer do not value them enough to deserve them.

Books are not the only poisonous influences on Nanda and Judith's carefully constructed environments. While the Duchess points out that Nanda's social environment is a "mal'aria" (195) (reminiscent of Daisy Miller's physical and social ailments), and Longdon notes that the girl breathes "a different air" (115) than her socially perfect grandmother, Judith recognizes a physical threat and eventually, the emotional one, on her own, shortly after her arrival in Poland. At first, the "layers of smoke-cloud" (437) that collect from constant cigarette smoking and poor ventilation make her sick. The odor of fried onions and potatoes become her constant companions, hanging thickly in the air of the hotel, meeting rooms, and restaurants along with the smoke. Even the student guides cough as they wave their cigarettes in the air to punctuate conversation. As Judith's attempts to communicate with Carl are stifled, he eventually shifts the blame for their problems on the physical environment: "we've been poisoned by this place" (470).

Instead of taking responsibility for his part in the failure of the relationship, Carl uses the physical and political climate of the country as convenient scapegoats. The students and academics in Poland, desperate for public and personal freedom, cling to their American counterparts pathetically, which makes Judith's experience more stressful, but Carl's refusal to consider that he might also be a cause of her distress tells her that her acceptance of a role created by Carl in order to satisfy his own needs and expectations, while ignoring hers, has poisoned her potential happiness within the relationship. Like Vanderbank, Carl maintains a "high moral tone" (433) that is unwavering in spite

of the pain he so obviously causes the woman he claims to admire. Judith considers that amidst the pollution and filth in the city, a more political and personal contaminant is in the air, echoed by the whispers and soft pleas of Polish attendees at parties and meetings: “the very air is poisoned” (451). Her bloodshot eyes notice the stained bathroom tiles in the hotel, the preponderance of brown teeth in the desperate smiles of tour guides, and the dirty ashtrays that litter tables everywhere. Nanda remains innocently unaware of the miasma created by the inappropriate speech and behavior of her mother’s social set until it is too late. When Judith recognizes that her romantic situation is similar to Nanda’s, she is encouraged to struggle against the weight of it, painful as such a process proves to be, so that she might avoid the same fate.

Judith works her resistance with language, a medium in which she is expert and expects to feel comfortable, if not superior, while Nanda remains innocent in the midst of the word games and indirect speech of her mother’s friends. Judith’s attempts to communicate with the Poles are thwarted by the language difference, although the students and professionals she meets use passable English. She finds the Polish language inaccessible and frustrating, and experiences a physical distress at the sound of it. This frustration is reflected in her conversations with Carl, during which she asks for clarity and simplicity regarding the terms of their relationship, and his responses, when he cares to respond, are the opposite. “Don’t speak in riddles” (439), she insists, irritated by his evasive speech. Longdon, like Judith, begs for explanations, lost in a social whirl so different from that which he knew years ago, but Nanda never considers that there is something to question or clarify. Judith finds that “it is unnerving to journey into a country whose language is so very foreign” (441), referring as much to the emotional and personal life she has ignored for so long as the external, physical experience in Poland. She repeatedly tells Carl, “I don’t understand” but his reply is always “are we arguing?” as if arguing would be unacceptable in his vision of a romantic relationship. Like Vanderbank, he avoids the question, instead “rummaging” and “rooting” to change the subject, refusing to acknowledge his partner’s needs. Vanderbank, who confesses himself noisy as a dozen birds during his final meeting with Nanda, is never pressed directly by her about his feelings and intentions towards her, but Judith wants more control over her future than Nanda has over hers. She accuses Carl of substituting empty words for other words that are more emotionally invested, such as “I love you” or “I hate you” and insists that he does not love her after proclaiming that she in fact loves him. Her declaration of love prompts a lukewarm response: “Oh yes, do you? . . . *Do* you?” (468). He smiles coldly and she soon comes to a point of hysteria Nanda never reaches: “I won’t demean myself for nothing!—for you!” (469). As Mary Allen notes, Oates is “better at showing the quiet terror that so

often lies under the surface of normal things, *the apprehension of violence*" (67), and at this moment, readers very clearly sense the rising fear in Judith's reply.

Nanda's family and friends leave her clueless about her pending troubles, but Judith is warned. Rushing to one of the many meetings she attends during her stay, Judith, understandably distracted, nearly walks into a glass door. She thinks it is an automatic door and pays no attention to it until one of her guides calls to her in warning. Barstow suggests that this door may "stand for the communication missing in Judith's relationship with Carl." Near the end of their trip, Carl walks into such a door as Judith watches, "without love," unable or unwilling to stop him, and does not move towards him after he slams against the glass and is hurt. Nanda slams against the "polished glass" (373) that divides her and Vanderbank, but does not want to bring up her distress at the indefinite nature of their relationship because it would be like "forcing a disfigurement or hurt" (380) on him, much like her intelligence and awareness has pained him. Judith has no such concern for Carl. She is forewarned, not only by her Polish guide but by her Jamesian one as well. Longdon assures Nanda that she has "a margin for accidents, for disappointments and recoveries" (113) because of her age and inexperience. Judith, like Longdon, has no such margin. She worries that like Nanda, she has "outlived . . . the period of her availability" (453). Unlike Nanda, she does not have to make a definite decision regarding her unwed state. While Mrs. Brookenham insists "we see our mistakes too late" (237), Judith sees hers before it is too late to correct.

In Gary F. Waller's *Dreaming America*, Oates explains that she feels her "own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my time, and (hopefully) to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future" (22). Nanda of the fin de siècle suffers from the knowledge the man she desires finds unacceptable, but Judith uses her intelligence to save herself further pain. In a 1981 essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, Oates addresses the accusations that her stories are too violent, as if a woman should keep her awareness of such things to herself, leaving those unpleasant but very real facts of life for men to write. Like Judith and Nanda, she finds that her validation of her knowledge and her intelligence puts her under attack by men who feel threatened by her acceptance of that reality, and she has no trouble setting the record straight and letting critics know that when she is questioned about the violence in her work, it is always "insulting. The question is always ignorant. The question is always sexist."

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