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# Severing Ties: A Lacanian Reading of Motherhood in Joyce Carol Oates's Short Stories "The Children" and "Feral"



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*"We are innocent... What is human is gone. What was ours is gone." (Oates 2007: 139)*

Joyce Carol Oates, American storyteller *extraordinaire*, concerns herself in her many short stories and novels with the "phenomenon of contemporary America: its colliding social and economic forces, its philosophical contradictions, its wayward, often violent energies." (Johnson 8) In her depiction of various characters the relation often invoked with almost gothic force is that of parents and children. At the root of the two short stories published in book form in 1972 ("The Children" in *Marriages and Infidelities*) and 2007

(“Feral” in *The Museum of Dr. Moses*), as seen from a Lacanian perspective, there seem to lie similar, if not the same premises. Due to various circumstances the parents (especially mothers) in these two stories find themselves unable to contain their children, both literally and psychologically; the children become forcibly separated from their parents’ (ostensibly) protecting hold and are freed to regress into a state of near Real; the parents’ unconscious identifying of their children as objects of desire and/or receptacles of psychological evacuation further negate any possibility of their children’s return to more conventional psychological states. Both stories thus function as horrifying glimpses into the complex and at times dangerous web of parent-children relations which acquire almost epic dimensions.

### Lacan and Interpsychic Tension

It is clear from this opening proposition that in order to approach the reading of the two stories, published within the mentioned collections over thirty years apart yet bearing a decided similarity of character positioning and thematic scope, it is first necessary to elaborate swiftly on those concepts of Lacan’s theory which are to be of use in determining the parameters of analysis. Being a post-structuralist thinker, Jacques Lacan to a significant extent divorces himself from the Sigmund Freud school of “organic” thought, rooted in the belief in the existence of a knowable, “natural” self and the reachable truth within one’s psychological life. Lacan posits the idea that the structuring of psyche is achieved through the acquisition and partial appropriation of language, whose strictures determine and limit the knowability of self and acceptability of any

notion of truth. In a tripartite construction of the psyche Lacan recognizes the domain of the Real (Natural State), as well as the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders. According to Dino Franco Felluga's *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts*, "The 'Real' refers to the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language" (264), a process that guides the psyche towards entering the Imaginary Order which crucially defines demand and desire through lack which is alleviated by resorting to fantasy. "The demand... is to make the other a part of itself, as it seemed to be in the child's now lost state of nature (the neonatal months). The child's demand is, therefore, impossible to realize and functions, ultimately, as a reminder of loss and lack." (152)

According to Lacan, by accepting the exigencies of the imposed language, the individual enters a contract with the larger society which is defined by the authority of laws and social hierarchy of which the individual's psychology now needs to become an integrated part. Lacan states that "it is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law." (1977: 67)

It is in the state of Imaginary Order that the individual begins the Mirroring Stage (which Lacan describes as "a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation" (4)), which is determined by the establishment of the coherent and ordered *Ideal-I* as opposed to, first the chaotic Real of the pre-language stage and later the beginnings of structure within post-natal development. This *Ideal-I* forms the enduring tension within the individual: "It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's

own ego made real on the imaginary level.” (1991: 142) Since fantasies about the ideal necessarily fall short of the Real (which remains forever elusive, and is the ultimate destroyer of our self-fictions), the individual continues to desire; “desires therefore necessarily rely on lack, since fantasy, by definition, does not correspond to anything in the Real.” (Felluga 72) Furthermore, and in alignment with the fantasy of the Ideal-I image “at the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections” (III).

In the Symbolic Order, however, which is governed by developed larger hierarchical systems and narratives one learns to obey in order to be able to participate, moving steadily further away from the Real. In this context “desire... could, in fact, be said to be our way to avoid coming into full contact with the Real, so that desire is ultimately most interested not in obtaining the object of desire but, rather, in reproducing itself.” (308) In other words, the objects of desire (and with Lacan as opposed to Freud desire does *not* necessarily contain the core of the sexual urge, nor is it exclusive to the individual: “our desire is never properly our own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies rather than material sexuality”(302)) are positioned as unobtainable precisely because to obtain them would be impossible and would cause a rift through which the seeping of the Real ultimately leads to an unbearable psychotic state. The perpetuity of desire in its widest meaning thus becomes the driving force of the interpsychic tension.

## The Suburban Motherhood

"This is not really a story about children, or even about a marriage..." (216)

In the very opening line of the story "The Children" Joyce Carol Oates announces it as such therewith preventing the readers' investment into the "reality" of the experience described, and positioning them at an additional remove from the characters and events—firmly establishing them as observers, not participants. In Lacanian terms Oates allows the gaze of the observer to appear to be just that—a detached gaze—and the veracity of this position will be revealed later within the story. The sentence also immediately belies the story's title; thus Oates creates from the outset a double negation of the traditional facet of fiction posing as a stand-in for reality. Indeed, she proceeds with the following statement: "The story is about the girl, Ginny, revealed to her through children." Firstly, the mother of the children in the title is herself referred to as a "girl", negating her putative experience as a grown woman/actual mother, and secondly it is announced that the titular children will serve as the means of revealing something *to* and *about* her. By relativizing Ginny's experience in the very beginning Oates destabilizes the readers' expectation created by the innocuous title.

Similarly, in the story "Feral", whose title sounds, of course, much more menacing, the opening sequence "*She was a good mother. Always she'd been a good mother. She had loved her son. She would not cease loving him. Only those few minutes she'd been distracted. Only seconds!*" (120) Oates at once engenders the notion of good motherhood and of its negation. The positive claim of the first four sentences (and at this point the only indication that the narrative voice is not the

“objective” third person are the italics) proclaims an image at odds with the story’s title, yet the follow-up clearly indicates the (self-)illusion exercised by the character of the mother, Kate. Both female characters in these stories are therefore initially problematized as embodying their function less fully, or at all. What is essentially being brought into question in both stories is not only whether Ginny and Kate are good mothers, but whether they are mothers at all, excepting the fact that they have physically borne children.

Both stories deal with lives of new and slowly maturing suburban wives at odds with the social hierarchy of which they have become a part. In “The Children” we follow Ginny’s attempts at dealing with the demands of her life as a mother, especially in relation to her first-born child. In “Feral” Kate is faced with the challenge of living not only with the guilt of having endangered her young son’s life, but more significantly with his rapidly changing nature after a near-death experience. Each of the stories features similar settings, and more importantly a similar motif of animal-like children, represented as alienated and *alien* in regards to their parents, particularly their mothers.

Ginny and her husband buy a house in the suburbs, in a place called Fox Hollow (offering the reader an association to the idea of a lair, rather than a home)—an area that is still largely uninhabited and empty, with unpaved roads. There are several new families there as well, all apparently very similar to theirs, or to what they are aiming to become. In “Feral” Kate and her husband live in an (another) suburban milieu, “an oasis of tranquil, tree-lined residential streets, custom-built houses set in luxuriously deep,

spacious wooded lots" (121). The fact that Hudson Ridge is only an hour's drive from New York is clearly symbolic, as it emphasizes the closeness of the metropolis to what is initially depicted as Paradise. This positioning of the two families foreshadows the danger contained within the facile conceptualization of urban areas as wild—as through the stories the case might be made for exactly the opposite, that these rural parts of the state are psychologically more menacing. The suburban setting, including the proximity of woods, a lake and uninhabited areas can safely be interpreted as a (futile) attempt by the parents to return to the natural setting of the Real of their own neonatal states. As both stories evolve, it becomes apparent that, even though the children might in certain ways still be able to touch the Real, the mothers become dangerously unhinged through exposure to glimpses of the natural state.

In justifying the move, in both cases from more urban areas, both women reveal an ambivalent motivation which appears to be a combination of their own unexpressed desire and what they suppose the need of their children would be. Kate says: "Not just to escape the stress of the city, but for the baby's sake. It seems so unfair to subject a child to New York." (2007: 122); while Ginny is even more firmly self-involved: "She thought ... of how normal she was, of how she had crossed over into the world of adulthood and taken up greedily all its symbols, without hesitation." (1975: 220). Indeed, Ginny seems quite obsessed with the idea of having "crossed over" successfully, and at the same time keeping at bay the paralyzing fear of not having succeeded at all—as if her life depended on this success, and this transition into adulthood. But the very fact that there is fear lurking behind her careful mask of satisfaction and



normalcy brings us back to her being still a “girl” as described at the outset. The impression is that she is attempting to fulfill *somebody else’s* sense of a normal path in life, all the while stifling the urges that might usurp this goal. Meeting other women who appear to be just like her seems to serve the purpose of intensifying her sense of belonging, while it in fact often magnifies her feeling that she is observing her life detached from her body and marveling at the experience. Ginny desires “to be left alone and to watch others” (217). As is frequent in Joyce Carol Oates’s stories and novels, there exists here an explicit positioning of the female character as someone who chooses to be on the outside, to observe instead of participating—“she was finished with that sort of thing, the competition and the uneasiness” (217). Ginny is, indeed, revealed to be patriarchal in her views, seeing her role as a passive figure in a relationship as preferable and logical, even though paradoxically, she does clearly feel that her burden of being a mother and a homemaker is more taxing than her husband’s work. There is a clear sense of duality in Ginny’s character, a surface aimed to please the Symbolic Order and a layer of subsumed thought, which is pure Imaginary fantasy; “She summoned up intelligently the differences that lay between her and the woman she had become... she was never quite herself, always harassed or taken off guard.” (227-228)

A similar deep and questioning doubt exists in Kate’s seemingly more adaptable persona: “Perhaps that was all it required, then, to be a happy, normal mother: to behave as if one were a happy, normal mother. As if there were no reason to behave otherwise.” (135) The phrase “*as if*” is repeated twice, clearly indicating that in the back of Kate’s mind there *are* reasons to behave

differently—to reject the experience of contented motherhood. In Kate's case this ambivalence towards her state of motherhood is unequivocally addressed by Oates, and interestingly in a passage that assumes the more subjective narrative viewpoint of the child, Derek: "His mother had had several miscarriages preceding his birth and by the age of thirty-nine when he was finally born, she joked about being physically exhausted, emptied out, 'eviscerated.' It was a startling, extreme figure of speech but she spoke with a wan smile, not in complaint so much as in simple admission." (121) The producing of the child was for Kate obviously a traumatic experience, more psychically than physically, and rendering her mother response to Derek (named after her father) all the more complex, even before the incident of his drowning. In a later part of the story, Oates slides back into Kate's perspective and offers the readers a sort of a character's personal explication/justification for the (largely intuitive) sensation of the intrusion of the Real into the seemingly well-established Symbolic Order: "they were in their forties, middle-aged and too old for parenthood, this was their punishment for daring to bring life into the world, raw unheeded life not theirs to protect." (144) In "Feral" as well as in "The Children" there is this sense of "passing over", of change, of a maturation process—the couples have, by renouncing the city and choosing to raise their children in the rural environment, embraced a more responsible way of life—therefore acknowledging the dominance of the Symbolic Order in exchange for the Imaginary. In both stories this movement would seem to be logical and desirable, if not for the boiling undertow of unsatisfied, murky desires in both mothers, which are reflected in their ambivalent relationships with their children.

Therefore, adopting the conscious attitude of adherence to the Symbolic Order within the constraints of suburban life does not extinguish the underlying and to a certain extent necessary existence of the Imaginary Order which in both cases informs the essential psychological structuring of the mothers. The Imaginary Order thus becomes “historicized”, i.e. contextualized within the reality of the exigencies of the adopted Symbolic Order. The implication is that by choosing a suburban life instead of the urban environment the female characters in both stories expect to find a sense of unity between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders, which is in actuality shown to be impossible as both the suburbia and the Symbolic Order are indeed historical categories while the Imaginary Order is not.

Having the first child in a way takes over Ginny’s life in an additional manner—after having gladly sacrificed her career and her social life, she now surrenders even her individuality to the idea of the child being an extension of herself, and a more worthy and altogether amazing extension. The child flourishes with all the dedication and care which Ginny provides through a certain haze and almost involuntarily, automatically, like an animal mother. These are the significant moments of intrapsychic rupture where in the Oatesian world the animalistic threatens to topple over the artifice of civilized order. Kate is similarly, and largely intuitively, instinctually worried about “Derrie” even before the accident. She feels she has produced a child who is too different from other children, and, by association, she obscurely feels she is to be held responsible for what is essentially the child’s own developing character: “*My own heart, exposed.*” (124) Kate obviously also has trouble separating the fantasy

of her child from herself even after being “eviscerated” by him—and this “bifurcation” of her maternal experience will form the essential tension of the story.

### The Children’s Selfhood

As opposed to their mothers, the children in both stories appear to be more self-possessed, although positioned much closer to the natural state of the Real. Existing within such a liminal in-between space allows them to shift allegiances and to perform different roles in relation to each other, and other adults (to some extent their fathers, but, again, most frequently and ambivalently, their mothers). In fact, the children, although growing, do not seem to “pass over” as both Ginny and Kate strive to, but remain, for different reasons, in states of almost neonatal communion with the Real. Thus Rachel, Ginny’s first-born, and her young Baby Brother in “The Children” are positioned by Oates in such a way as to represent embodiments of Ginny’s various fears as well as desires—the girl erupting with “the real violence, the intense, crazy violence” (227) and the baby maintaining a “sleepy blank contentment” (233). Young Derek in “Feral” is “a large, animated doll” (120), before his drowning accident, a docile child, not very bright but personable, often “stammering, tremulous, clumsy” and in the words of his teacher “like a baby Buddha” (123) until after his death experience he regresses tellingly into the realm of the near-Real, and not accidentally into an animalistic psychic stage to become “stiff, watchful, unsmiling” (131), his eyes “so dilated, a glassy, impersonal black” (132), eyes which are “Staring, implacable, unreadable,

nonhuman eyes. Grotesquely dilated, even in daylight. A horror in such eyes.” (134)

Initially, by surrendering the possibility of individuality through giving up her career and life in the city, Ginny manages to find a semblance of it in joining the band of similar women. Through mirroring a behavior and a life as ordered through the authority of patriarchy she builds a false sense of individual significance—by becoming an unquestioning member of a group she feels allowed to *become*. With time, however, she perceives her sense of Symbolic Order as being attacked by her little girl, Rachel, as well; growing up, the girl develops a fierce and assertive personality, thus committing a betrayal of Ginny’s need for complacency and flatness. It is as if Ginny has poured her own sense of lack which fuels her desire for status quo into her child. The child, in turn, bearing as yet no burden of desire created within the Imaginary Order, builds from her mother’s projection and evacuation a stronger sense of self mediated by Ginny who now, in psychic reversal, begins to find it threatening to her fantasy: “Everything was so very vulnerable, so very easily ruined.” Since the reality of Ginny’s self slams brutally against the Real in the deeply underlying sense of her existence she is left wondering “What would her real self have said to that flushed, spiteful child?” (228), through a sentiment that betrays her deeply conflicted and ambivalent feelings.

Kate’s experience, on the other hand, stems from a firmly placed feeling of guilt towards her child which is only fully and openly manifested during the incident at the pool when she fails to react (or even notice) her son drowning. The precise facts of his death-and-resurrection are not known, which adds to Kate's sense

of guilt; one possible scenario, essentially absolving Kate from responsibility, is presented by Oates within successive brackets, as though it is something not allowed to be broached outside Kate's fantasies of innocence: "(Kate had no proof, no one would offer proof, Derek would never make any accusation)" (126) and it concerns the fact that the accident at the pool might have been ironically overshadowed by the plight of another child, a ten-year-old "nervous, tearful" (125) girl who got water up her nose and was demanding attention, which was taken away from Derek. Regardless, throughout the fateful event Kate remains a necessarily passive observer, incapable of any thought or action. At the heart of her misfortune lies the illogical and surreal fact of the child's death and resurrection—which Joyce Carol Oates conveniently narrates from a perspective of a distraught mother whose faculties of objective perception are suspect—a fact that everybody has difficulty accepting or even acknowledging. Once more Kate is here "made to see" (127) by her husband what the acceptable version of events is, which further undermines her sense of self.

Furthermore, in "The Children" the little girl Rachel incurs her mother's dislike and bewilderment by not complying with Ginny's imposed idea of desirable character and childlike behavior—in other words, by becoming a separate person, a *herself*, as she grows up. The real mirroring takes place now between Ginny as the imperfect mother of a child with a developing personality which ends up containing all the elements her mother has excised from her own self—and Ginny's Ideal-I which she desires to locate within Rachel as the extension of Ginny. Through a process of self-splitting or severing, a separation of Ginny's fear and anxiety concerning the

development of an independently functional personality and their evacuation into another takes place, and this psycho-traumatic event objectifies the initial personal threat. The feeling flowing from mother to child grows into revulsion, which is within the world of the story a reiteration of Ginny's sense of disgust at witnessing the crazed girl belonging to a crazed mother in the supermarket in a scene through which Oates offers a suitable psychological and narrative parallel. This is why Ginny at one point wonders: "Had she ever been a child herself? For some reason it frightened her to think so." (229) In contrast to her first-born child, Rachel, the nameless baby boy, the Baby Brother Ginny now prefers to her older child, maintains a blankness that Ginny finds comforting and unthreatening. It is thus no surprise that Rachel hates her brother, and now, in her turn, pours her resentments onto his vapidness. Rachel, as the psychological object of her mother's desire and at the same time the reminder of her failure as a personality carries within herself "... a lifetime that had taken itself out of Ginny and would run and run away from her and never come back." (235)

### The Severing

The scene of the drowning in "Feral" is a key moment through which Oates introduces the final and irrevocable severing of ties between the parents and the child. As the child's fate was rent from her hands, Kate assumes, as was previously mentioned, the role of the passive observer when it comes to Derek's subsequent transformation. The reality of the child/changeling no longer seems to fit her projection of what Derek-the-son should be like. Kate is, in other words, forced into creating an ideal image of the boy who has

become her object of desire, and Oates positions the mother's crucial conflict with the Real within the discrepancy between this ideal image and Derek's new psychic (and even physical) shape. Kate is now "always being surprised when she saw him, for she'd somehow imagined him much younger, frailer. It was an effort for her to realize that he wasn't four years old any longer, or three." (127-128) She feels the psychological necessity to regress into the time when Derek was completely reliant on her, especially as the "new" Derek is so radically different and independent; by creating this alternate reality she will be able to hold on to the fantasy of her child, and more significantly of her own motherhood.

In "The Children" the critical event through which Joyce Carol Oates establishes the final breakage between Ginny and her daughter is the apparently random appearance of an unknown boy, older than the other children in the neighborhood, a curious child with an unusual appearance and animal-like behavior. The boy's bared physicality and open psychic hunger frighten Ginny and deeply disturb her as they represent a clear threat to her sense of imposed yet fragile Symbolic Order; also, on a deeper level, there is a sense of recognition of something within the uncivilized boy that communicates with Ginny's Otherness hitherto utterly rejected and negated through her effortful attempts at living a "safe" suburban life of a placid wife, which is exemplified in the almost offhand comment that "... Ginny could not remember having had a self to assert until her marriage." (225)

In both these stories Joyce Carol Oates follows these key events by a drastic change of direction, as they assume a decidedly sinister turn, breaking away from the carapace of reality (and realistic



storytelling). The function of what Oates herself has termed “*realistic allegory*” (Showalter 68) within stories which although set in a realistic environment proceed to deconstruct or erode the margins of the known, realistic and understandable world and develop into something much more symbolic seems to be to provide the readers with the sudden inversion of the Gaze that had up to then seemed coolly detached and not inclusive of the readers themselves. This is the element of her work that has most often been described as “*gothic*”—the divorce from the apparent reality of the primary level within the story-frame and an inclusion of otherworldly/abject/mythic elements that contradict this primary level of understanding as well as confound the readers’ expectation. It would appear that the strategy of destabilizing the reader works primarily as a means to mediate Oates’s message of psychic severance and the clash with the Real through isolating the reader within a unique experience of an almost schizophrenically split story which turns its Gaze back upon them.

Consequently, in “Feral” Derek becomes different in more ways than one after his resurrection: “like a startled animal, his eyelids fluttering, his small body going rigid” (129) at the slightest of sounds (as if scarred by his mother’s screams of guilt). Since Oates positions this part of the story within Kate’s frantic perspective, there is an element of ambivalence as to how far she could be trusted when it comes to her perception, especially where it concerns the child’s changing physical appearance:

“Derek’s teeth were more pronounced, his lower jaw longer and more angular, like a dog’s snout; he sniffed the air, conspicuously; his very eyeballs had grown tawny, as if with

jaundice, and the dilation was often so severe as to comprise the entire iris. The surface of his eyes was slick and glassy, reflecting light." (136)

The psychic transformation of the child through the act of disuniting from his parents appears to have become physical as well—or that, at least, is how Kate interprets the lack located at the heart of her object of desire, because the child is growing away from her—she is not his "keeper" anymore. Derek's animalism seen in the context of his growing out from under his mother's thumb perfectly captures the neurotic trauma of separation: Kate is weak with the recollection of her former absolute possession of the child that is no longer hers: "Her milk-swollen breasts, her tender nipples, and the infant blindly locating the nipple, sucking with unfocused eyes—how happy she'd been. How addicted she'd become, without knowing it. *Love, baby-love. What hunger.*" (137) Equally, the literal act of Derek's biting his father's thumb points to the child's rejection of not only the Imaginary Order but also the ultimate, Symbolic Order by denying to acknowledge "The Law of the Father".

Kate becomes obsessed with the child's change. The sense of the mystical is evoked through the idea that the child has traveled somewhere unknown and unknowable during the short time he was dead and that what has come back is essentially not himself anymore. Looking into his eyes she thinks "These are an animal's eyes." (131) Still, she cries to herself "*You have to love me!*" (131) Her attitude towards the child is hardly logical in realistic terms, yet it fully makes sense psychically as she relives the trauma of separation: "she would have called after him except she feared rejection." (132) The mother thus becomes a split-self image of the owner and

beggar, the giver of life and the abandoned lover, and the child nothing more than the receptacle and source of her desire born out of lack.

Similarly, “The Children” takes on quite a dark atmosphere—a gothic overtone that belies the realistic setting, after Ginny realizes that her daughter has slipped away from her needful grasp. A clear if subdued sense of danger develops through Ginny’s inability to understand the children as separate entities, and especially her own child whose character also adopts certain animalistic characteristics as Rachel approaches the natural state. The children become another band, a separate species with rules, ideas and secrets of their own, and Ginny feels rejected and isolated all over again. It is as if her unfulfilled past is catching up with her through the children’s severance from their parents’ Symbolic Order: “She felt as if she were in the presence of a terrible danger, almost a kind of corruption.” (232) This sense of doom is reinforced by Ginny’s prophetic dream, “... a nightmare, about a pack of wild dogs breaking loose upon her and her children” (233-234), which Oates uses to great effect as another parallel between the Real and the children’s regressive neonatal natural state, which the parents can understandably only perceive as animalization.

Finally, and significantly, both stories end in eruptions of almost horror-like denouements. The progression from the initial ostensible blandness of suburban life is gradual yet relentless: the severing of ties between the parents (again, especially mothers) and the children through the severing of psychic dependence and liberation, is depicted by Oates as a cataclysm of nearly epic proportions. In Oates’s words “language is all we have to pit against

death and silence" (Oates qtd in Johnson 2006: vii), yet within the world of both these stories the language as the remover of the Real and the exciter of the Imaginary Order fails to bridge the growing gap between what essentially become two sects of psychic energies, mutually almost deadly incompatible. (However, it is worth noting that on the linguistic meta-level and through the use of realistic allegory and gothic elements—invoking images of almost apocalyptic disintegration—Oates herself offers resistance to the Symbolic Order by invoking the kind of reader's response which is akin to the children's descent into the Real. These images function as alogical and a-rational prompts to facilitate the readers' instinctual understanding of and identification with the stories' characters, thereby helping to make Oates's point.)

Kate's "*haunted-eyed feral son*" (138), followed by his devastated parents during one night joins a band of similar animal children by the moonlit lake in a paragraph of singular power:

There were others with him. Small, lithe figures like his, and several taller figures. Who these were, male, female, their faces, their eyes, they could not see, were fearful of seeing; they heard low murmurous voices, unless it was the wind, they heard—was it laughter? They dared not venture forward. They clutched hands like frightened children. "Don't let them see us! Be still." Their hearts beat with a shared terror, for what would happen to them if they were seen? (145)

By ending the story with the terrifying image of a horde of wild, animal children, creeping away into the night and gathering, far from their parents, to share the sense of belonging to a new pack Oates calls forth a vision of devastation and hopelessness when it

comes to the psychological possibility of healing the rupture. In essence theirs is just a separate yet similar pack in comparison to that of their parents—they are exclusive, dangerous and protective groups. And the question is whether the term “feral” will be literally applied to the wild children, or metaphorically to the sect of suburban parents as well, individuals incapable of surmounting the essential lack that drives their distorted lives.

“The Children” finally culminates in Ginny’s unyielding drive to hurt her daughter, blindly, ecstatically: “She woke up, now, to this spanking; she had not really been awake before.” (235). The ecstasy of destroying her object of desire, herself as she could have been, offers a terrifying climax to the story as it finally pushes Ginny into voicing the question that contains the truth of her denial of herself: “What do *you* know about it? What the hell do *you* know?” voiced at the very end of the story, and ostensibly aimed at her uncomprehending husband who has just “snatched the bloody spoon from her” (236), but at least in equal measure at herself, the little girl hidden inside the failed woman. Having denied herself the rite of passage into true psychic adulthood, Ginny becomes the victim and the abuser, and one gets the sense that Oates is implying a repetition of a pattern, a vicious circle of negation, mirroring, separation and punishment that embraces forever the parent and the child.

### Concluding Thoughts

Both “The Children” and “Feral”, although published 35 years apart, showcase to stunning effect Joyce Carol Oates’s abiding interest in the workings of the human psyche and the interaction

between biologically and societally conditioned individuals and family members. In shaping the circumstance and characters as radically breaking away from reality in crucial scenes Oates also performs an act of writerly severing of ties from exclusively realistic storytelling: her authorial choices offer in both stories a reversal of the notion of fiction functioning as an alternate to “reality” outside fiction. The use of the concept of *realistic allegory* is an excellent choice: while utilizing elements from the real world this device simultaneously distances the story from it, thus shaping it into a materialization/objectification of psychic processes. The reader is in this way further transformed from an observer into the participant of the ongoing psychological developments of characters, and allowed to correlate with female protagonists who are depicted as both belonging to and exiled from the narrative. To that effect, regardless of whether the reader’s reaction to such literary practice is positive or negative (as, for example, readers sometimes find Oates’s stories incomprehensible, violent, or overly verbose and react almost aggressively to the spillage of the irrational into the ostensibly ordered world of realistic storytelling), their reactions are essentially a part of the way Oates’s stories function as the methods she uses to construct them.

Crucially, in both stories the mothers portrayed as almost- or non-mothers remain through Oates’s storytelling agency without the benefit of self-realization or actualization within the new Symbolic Order as such order is simply not on offer (especially as they inhabit suburban areas, liminal zones between urban and rural, between masculine and feminine). Feeling deeply inadequate, both Ginny and Kate experience regressive mechanisms pushing them

back towards the domain of the Real and the neonatal state, a journey impossible to achieve as they have been thoroughly “contaminated” by the Symbolic Order (through language, culture, adopted societal models). Oates positions both mothers within a space that lies somewhere in between the joints of Lacan’s tripartite structure of the human psyche, which adds to the interpsychic tension of the stories—not inhabiting any of the parts fully, or without spillage, Ginny and Kate are destined to feel apprehension regardless of their “reality” circumstances. Additionally, the essential lack of the father’s presence in both stories contributes to the idea that inhabiting the Symbolic Order remains elusive for mothers as well as their children, even though the grown-ups do *appear* to exist more or less comfortably within the larger society.

Finally, the mothers in both “The Children” and “Feral” end up hurting/losing their children not just to (outward) circumstance but to (internal) strife as well. As she has done many times before and since, Joyce Carol Oates allows the reader to bear witness within moments of decisive actions (and non-actions) that altogether explore and offer insight not only into the eternal and repetitious psychic struggle between individuals but also into the society which engenders such struggle and perpetuates it as a means of a legitimate and inevitable process of personal maturation.

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