THE GOTHIC IN THE FICTION
OF JOYCE CAROL OATES

A Thesis

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for the Degree Master of Arts

by

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Approved by

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Dedication

To my parents for their help;
John for his support; and a special thanks
to Dr. John W. Niste and Dr. Mildred B. Munday
for their willingness to advise me on this project.
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Introduction

A skeptical narrator describes the chaotic yet chilling experience of a seance:

For some minutes he and two or three other spirits quarreled. (Each declared himself Mrs. A—'s Chief Communicator for the evening.) Small lights flickered in the semi-dark of the parlor and the table quivered beneath my fingers and I felt, or believed I felt, something brushing against me, touching the back of my head. I shuddered violently... and broke into perspiration, but the experience was not altogether unpleasant.

Is this passage, which is full of nineteenth-century shilling-shocker gothic trappings, from the pen of Nathaniel Hawthorne? Edgar Allan Poe? Henry James, when he is writing tales? No, the passage is the work of Joyce Carol Oates, who has often been accused of writing in the antiquated gothic mode.

The term gothic probably has as many definitions as there are literary interpreters, but Oates's gothic is derived from the tradition which originated in 1765 and has continued throughout modern literature. Although Oates does not usually pursue the supernatural, the very basis of eighteenth-century gothic, some of her devices, such as stormy landscapes or soul-revealing mirrors, are from the first gothic novels by Horace Walpole or Ann Radcliffe. As did every gothic writer, Oates doggedly exploits the sense of dread or the suspense so necessary for the development of a gothic tale. Oates's gothic is serious; she does not allow her reader to laugh at frightful consequences, except...
perhaps at her grotesques. Rarely does Oates's gothic fiction and happily with the innocent maiden and her pursuer joyfully marrying one another, as does a modern gothic romance, although one of Oates's major gothic themes is the flight of the innocent. Certainly not all of Oates's fiction is gothic, but when she is gothic, she effectively draws upon the centuries of the tradition, while expanding the use and meaning of gothic into the twentieth century.

Even when the novels of such gothic masters as Walpole or Radcliffe were in vogue, the word gothic was used derisively. The same is true of commentators on Joyce Carol Oates. The reviewers and critics, especially of Oates's early fictions, apply the term gothic as a means of depreciation. For example, a reviewer of them announces: "This novel is a charnel house of Gothic paraphernalia: blood, fire, insanity, anarchy, lust, corruption, death by bullets, death by cancer, death by plane crash, death by stabbings, beatings, crime, riot, and even unhappiness." Samuel P. Pickering despises Oates's time-worn gothic traditions, which are as "hackneyed as Horatio Alger," while perceiving that these conventions "resemble those of the gothic novel with neuroses replacing skeletons in closets and the mean of sexual ecstasy drowning out the heroine's last sigh as she falls faintly and innocently to the castle floor." Because so many of Oates's novels and short stories can be classified as gothic, surely "something uncivil squats on her back; mad and hairy, red in tooth and claw."

No wonder Oates is considered to be a gothic author, when her fictions include the aberrant activities of "arson, rape, riot, mental breakdown, murder (plain and fancy, with excursions into patricide,
matricide, uxoricide, mass filicidio), suicide. Besides being responsible for such ghostly tales, Oates admits (in writing) to have been possessed by Fernandes, while composing the mystical *The Poisoned Kiss* and Other Stories from the Portuguese, translated from the imaginary work, *Aulasios.* She acknowledges that "there seemed to be a great pressure, a series of visions... I was besieged by Fernandes... . . . I was able to alternate a 'Fernandes' story with one of my own... as a kind of bargain: otherwise Fernandes would have overwhelmed me." Oates also admits to being conventional: "I absolutely don't believe there is much originality. I just see myself as standing in a very strong tradition and my debt to other writers is very obvious." However, she does not quite divulge what this tradition is.

For the most part, Oates's gothic has not been too often compared with Walpole's or Radcliffe's but rather with the American Gothic of Hawthorne and Poe, which combines the rational and romantic, and with the Southern Gothic most often associated with Faulkner, Welty, and McCullers. After all, very few of her fictions contain the flickering lights and floating specters of the above passage. Instead, her fiction, especially her early writings, such as "By the North Gate" or *With Shuddering Fall,* are set in closed worlds such as the narrow confines of Eden County, populated by a variety of grotesques.

A number of critics suggest that Oates's fictional tradition is "in the dominant American fictional tradition romance derived from Hawthorne and beyond, with European analogues." She is, by the way, quite adept in employing the traditional gothic trappings, which were originally devised for *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Mysteries of*
Edelheit (1794). The worlds of her fictions are harsh nightmares through which characters pass as if in a dream. Her landscapes are splattered with crumbling castles like Bellefleur Manor, or at least with ramshackle ancestral homes in need of repair. These decaying castles are cursed by some loathsome secret or inhabited by villainous or tyrannical parental figures, as is the Pedersen household in *Wunderland*. To increase the gothic flavor, Oates often includes a persecuted innocent or a hermit or hints of incest or an ambivalent figure, who appears to be evil incarnate, such as Arnold Friend (or is that Friend?) in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

Oates also expands upon traditional gothic to make it more palatable for the modern reader. After all, the twentieth-century American countryside is hardly filled with remote manorial homes resembling Roderick Usher’s. Instead, the setting for modern gothic crimes is the none-too-healthy atmosphere of the small town or the sprawling city. In particular, Detroit, in *Shade* and *To Whom What You Will*, is "like an old haunted castle as it transforms dreams of human progression and immortality to a nightmare of decay and death."12 The twentieth-century gothic villain is rarely a deformed monster with supernatural strength. Instead, in an Oates novel, this tyrant is often an overly-authoritative father, like Mr. Hess in *With Standing Fall*.

Despite various critical attempts to define Oates’s brand of gothicism, and her admission to "standing in a very strong tradition," Oates coyly suggests that "Gothicism, whatever it is, is not a literary tradition so much as a fairly realistic assessment of modern life."13 Just exactly what she means by this evasive clue is unclear.
Is Oates suggesting that the world is so chaotic that no attempt can be made to explain it rationally? Does she mean that beneath the surface of normal, everyday life, incomprehensible unreality may suddenly burst through? Is Oates suggesting that barbaric, violent behavior is all-pervasive in modern society? Charged with writing too often about raw violence, Oates replies, "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..." All in all, Oates is admit in exploring the evils and passions that haunt us all.

Certainly not all of Oates's fiction is gothic, and any critic who dismisses all of her writings as such is a careless reader. However, the fictions which will be examined in this paper, With Shuddering Fall and A Garden of Earthly Delights; them; Wonderland; "Ruth" and Oyeha; "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and "Queen of the Night"; and BellaFlux are representative of Oates's gothic for a number of reasons. Although such novels as Midwodd and The Assassin may be gothic in atmosphere, the narrative format of these two novels is far from the traditional constant first or third person narrative usually employed in gothic novels. In addition to the technique of traditional narration, the fictions examined in this paper consciously or unconsciously drew upon the original gothic elements while formulating a "modern gothic."

Oates may be considered at her gothic best when she writes what one reviewer paradoxically calls "Urban Gothic, a type of naturalism saved from the simple cataloguing of disasters by the author's ability
to transform the mysteries of experience into vital characterizations." 

The cataloguing of disasters as well as daily events and observations is very much a part of Cates's technique. By crowding her novels and tales with the numerous trivial details of day-to-day life, she is better able to suddenly evoke the "terror that so often lies under the surface of normal things." For example, "6:27 p. m." chronicles certain intervals during a day in the life of a hairdresser named Glenda. Her day, starting at 7:30 a. m., is cluttered with a tawdry array of wigs in curlers, gold-flecked nail polish, asphyxiating hairspray, late customers, and insufficient day-care. The crowded day is interrupted by three or four anonymous phone calls leading Glenda to suspect that her ex-husband is threatening her. Even though the suspense is built up through Glenda's self-constructed fears, the reader never knows what monstrously happens at 6:27 p. m. because the last entry is at 6:25. We can only speculate.

One of the qualities which makes Cates a "modern gothic" novelist is her ability to sustain suspense throughout a narrative as she does in "6:27 p. m." Just as the original gothic novelists deliberately tried to titillate their readers by piling terror upon horror through the shock effects of bleeding skeletons or worm-infested corpses, Cates more subtly tries to maintain a sense of dread. She often accomplishes this through setting. Of course the reader will expect something treacherous to happen to a character who is forced to live in a crime-ridden city. Or Cates's characters sometimes foretell dangers to sustain a sense of dread, as when Lowry predicts the four-year-old Swan is "going to kill lots of things" in A Garden of Earthly Delights.
Cates reader need only wait for Swan to grow a little older to become a murderer. Perhaps Cates is better at developing suspense in her short stories, but she is hailed as "the mistress of panic... No one, not even Lawrence, has so given the novel over to extreme states of feeling." 18

Cates has also earned her reputation as a modern gothic novelist because she plays upon a very real fear, a "fear that normal life may suddenly turn monstrous." 19 Again and again, Cates warns that appearances cannot be trusted: how the seemingly idyllic countryside of Eden County can erupt into a vengeful and horrific environment—how a slick yet attractive young punk is really a thirty-two-year-old man wearing make-up and a wig ("Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"). Often the victim inadvertently becomes the victimiser as in "Small Avalanches."

In this story, thirteen-year-old Nancy, who is about to be sexually molested, forces her would-be attacker to climb a steep hill, resulting in his suffering a heart attack. It is that "sense of the irrational, with its potential for destruction, intruding into the banality of modern... life that makes Cates's fiction so distinctive, so seductive." 20

One theme that Cates develops through her modern gothic fiction is that "overwhelming sense of those psychological pressures in American life which produce our obsessions and frustrations, our dreams of love and power, our struggles to understand the world and ourselves." 21 Cates presents worlds of deeply-disturbed characters, who, unlike their early-gothic counterparts, live in a time benefited by modern psychology.

Even so, Cates's characters are controlled by a force they do not under-
stand, which is often described as nothing more than fate. In *With Shuddering Fall*, Cha uses no idea why he so desperately loves and needs Keen, but still he is obsessed with her. Many of Oates's characters are so driven by their passions that they are destroyed either by insanity or death.

Yet another theme central to Oates's gothic is similar to that of current gothic romances' cover illustrations of "a fleeing girl in a flowing gown and a background structure—a castle, bamboo hut, Chae. Adams house . . . with a single light in the window." Perhaps this is another reason Oates is berated by the critics; her central character is often quite similar to those of the Harlequin Romancers': a fleeing innocent. More often than not, Oates does not write about a maiden in distress, but rather "innocents," both male and female, escaping a person or institution which is threatening their selfhood. In fact, each of the novels to be explored is concerned with the flight of the innocent. Karen and Cha (in *With Shuddering Fall*) as well as Clara (in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*) and Jesse (in *Wanderland*) are trying to flee from authoritarian fathers, while Maureen and Jules (in *Guys*), Edwin (in *Cybele*), and Gideon (in *Bellefleur*) are trying to escape forces greater than they are.

The term gothic should no longer be applied derivatively to Joyce Carol Oates's fiction. Already some critics feel that she is a master gothic writer. At the same time, Oates has given a new meaning to the term. From her pen, gothic fiction becomes realistic fiction with grotesque people—monsters, really—devouring each other in a welter of everyday detail.
We are used to it in newspaper reports and in our more fanciful nonfiction, but with novels one usually makes a choice. Gothic fiction (imperiled maidens in windy castles) over here; realistic fiction (junkies in slums) over there. Miss Oates's combination of the extravagant and the familiar comprises a perspective on fiction that is both personal and exciting.23

Although Oates draws upon such traditional gothic fixtures as stormy landscapes or confining ancestral homes, she is a modern gothic writer. Perhaps Oates should be trusted when she defines "Gothic" as a "fairly realistic assessment of modern life." For in her modern gothic, Oates exposes the indistinguishable "night-side" of life, in which everyone is a victim either of his own raging passions or of tyrannical grotesques who inhibit freedom. Oates writes suspense-filled fictions about everyday life, which at any moment may turn into horrific nightmares because of some terrible turn of fate. For not only does Oates exploit the gothic tradition but innovates in it as well.

Notes for Introduction


2 1765 is the publication date of what is considered the first gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole.


4 Geoffrey Wolff, "Gothic City," rev. of Them, Newweek, 29 Sept. 1969, p. 120.


11 G. F. Waller is one such critic in *Dreaming America*, p. 71.


13 Note to review copies of them as quoted by Ellen G. Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), p. 79.

14 As quoted by Clemons, "Love and Violence," p. 72.


21 Robert H. Penniman, "Only Control: The Novels of Joyce Carol


Chapter One

The Setting for the Gothic Tale—Hostile Rien County

Very early in her career, Joyce Carol Oates was labeled as a gothic writer, primarily because of such short stories as "Swamps" (1963), "By the North Gate" (1963), and "The Death of Mrs. Sheer" (1964). Of her first twenty-five collected short stories, ten obviously take place in an area called Rien County, while nine others are at least in rural settings. It is this American countryside, primarily Rien County, that earns Oates her comparison with the Southern Gothic authors, especially Faulkner. Like Yoknapatawpha County, Rien County is a recurrent fictional setting, full of violent surprises and deranged characters. However, Rien County is most probably located in upstate New York.¹ What Oates gains by setting her early stories and some of her novels in the closed world of Rien County is a tale-like atmosphere, which allows her stories to hover somewhere between fantasy and reality.

In its heyday, the gothic tale depended almost exclusively on scenic effect to create the mood of the story or of the tormented characters. The more ominous, dangerous, and gloomy the setting, the greater the consistency of mood, and "the greater the sense of the Gothic response to the work."² Of course, one of the masters of
creating effect is Edgar Allan Poe in such works as "The Fall of the House of Usher":

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in . . . autumn . . . , when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing . . . through a singularly dreary tract of country . . . . I know not how it was — but, with the first glimpses of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit . . . . I looked upon the scene before me — upon the bare house, and the simple landscape features . . . — upon the bleak walls — upon the vacant eye-like windows — upon a few rank sedges — and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees — with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium . . . . I raised my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and h配置d tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down — but with a shudder even more thrilling than before — upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge and the ghastly tree stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows."

Not only does Poe capture the desolate atmospheric conditions of Usher Manor but also the sense of isolation and hopelessness that the narrator receives from the scene of "the bleak walls" and "vacant eye-like windows." Poe also allows the reader to share in the narrator's delicious sense of dread in the anticipation of the unspeakable and unknown "thrills" which are about to befall Usher's former school companion.

With more modern language, Bates tries to achieve the same sense of foreboding with her rural landscape. One story, "The Census Taker" (1963), not only is set in Eden County where "the great land" is "rolling and irregular as though an earthquake had distorted it ages ago" and where "the skyline stabbed far into the air, so that the sky itself looked shrunk and artificial" (p. 25), but also introduces gothic traits which will reappear in longer works. The census taker is
a stranger to Bleden County, and his alienation from the land and its people helps to establish the tension in the story. He braves the cryptic winter skies in order to collect statistical information. To create a legendary tone, Gates combines a fairy-tale introduction with a foreboding phrase:

Some time ago in Bleden County, in the remote foothills of Oriakany, the census taker of that area . . . came one day to the last of the houses he was to investigate (p. 21).

Does the latter part of this paragraph indicate that the census taker's job is completed, or that after this visit he will never be able to investigate another residence?

Besides the description of the ominous landscape and the suspenseful introduction, Gates allows the "sleepy" official to enter a rather peculiar household. Not only does the census taker find the daughter insane, but the whole family seems to be waiting supper for their father who disappeared ten years ago (p. 30). This rather mad bunch verbalizes the census taker's underlying fears—the two-year-old census can no longer be accurate—"Half them people you got in that book are dead now or grown old or different!" (p. 26). Daydreaming up until this time, the census taker begins to doubt the reality and importance of his record. He is no longer sure that the official town or his own home are still in existence; perhaps they are washed away in "a tidal wave or somethin'" (p. 29). He flees the house without completing the once important census. Just as legal records have no meaning for these rural folk, the barren landscape holds no meaning for the census taker. At the end of the tale, Gates indicates that the census taker will never
escape the hostile Blen setting because he tries to interpret the weather through "deliberate, ruthless logic" (p. 31), and neither the land nor its people can be logically explained.

Again and again, Oates uses Blen County with its turbulent land and disordered natives as a major setting in her tales, as well as in five of her novels. In the early novels, With Shuddering Fall (1964) and A Garden of Earthly Delights (1966), the rural landscape becomes important. Judging from the above titles, Oates quite literally intends her county to be that of a raped "Garden of Eden." At some point in these narratives, the rolling hills and green-dappled forests are quite idyllic. But the title of the first novel already suggests "the Fall," hence even before conflict arises, Blen is no Paradise. Blen County "reflect[s] the limiting frustration and incipient violence of a world of sour innocence, sexual and social expression, guilt, and death." It has already been suggested that through Oates's short stories, Blen is a hostile, unsettling environment and Oates is fairly consistent in her characterization of this setting.

From the gothic writers, Oates inherits a setting which can reflect the mental landscape of the characters. As G. F. Waller points out: "it is the emotional landscape—an interiorized Blen County—which constitutes the real setting of the novels." Hence, even if Waller's theory is only partially true, the sluggish streams and frozen ground of Pools Brook is emblematic of Karen's inability to express emotion, as well as of her father's coldness. The rocky fields and constipated rivers of Blen County reflect the narrow-mindedness and the limited capabilities of the folk living there.
By writing about a rural America, full of almost mythical figures such as the renowned Curt Revere, Gates attains a sense of timelessness or legendary tone in her early writings. As if she is afraid of offending the reader with the violence which will ensue, Gates tries to soothe us by locating her novels in remote Eden County. In a very gothic sense, her characters find themselves walking in a dream world, or even worse, a nightmare in which violence explodes or unreality becomes quite real. A recurrent phrase associated with Karen in With Shuddering Fall is that she feels "trapped within a dream." The worst thing about these nightmarish landscapes is that the characters cannot wake up and escape from their homes.

I. On With Shuddering Fall

At times, With Shuddering Fall seems to be an inflated short story out of the collections By the North Gate or Upon the Sweeping Flood. The Eden County of With Shuddering Fall is synonymous with the Eden County of "The Census Taker." The inhabitants are close to the land and are suspicious of strangers and innovations. Gates's first full-length work is not as well-wrought as might be hoped, mostly because of her less than expert use of language and under-developed motivation as contrasted with her other novels. This novel does introduce the gothic themes and concerns of Gates's later novels.

The novel opens upon the late-winter/early spring of Pools Brook, a farming hamlet in Eden. The landscape is threatening, "thick muddy water in the rapids churned with uprooted bushes, propelling sticks and
trunks and parts of boats before it." The creek itself "looked luring and sinister, and the rapids gurgled as if they gloated over its violent metamorphosis" (i, p. 8). Even though it is spring, the "colorless world, colorless morning sky" (i, p. 9) of the scene is life-denying rather than life-giving. The setting is viewed through the discontented eyes of Karen Herz, who feels secure yet bored in this rotting, stifling environment. Although "the chaotic landscape" of Pools Brook "with its little circle of controlled violence is an outward manifestation of Karen's shattered inscape," the countryside also reflects the bitter, icy reserve of the other natives.

Karen Herz is the first in the long line of Oates's vacuous women characters. She is comparable to the gothic maiden, whose "frame is so fragile, that a breath of wind might scatter it like chaff [i] it is sometimes stouter than a statue of cast iron . . . . Besides, she has tears, sighs, and half sighs, at command; lives a month on a mouthful, and is addicted to the pale consumption." One of Karen's favorite strolls is through the family graveyard, which has always attracted her (iii, p. 30). Karen is buffeted around by who knows what; there is no logical way to predict Karen's actions. She is most often depicted as one in a dream and when Shar intrudes, Karen can no longer differentiate between fantasy and reality. When running to Shar, it seems to Karen "that if this was not a dream it was related closely to a dream" (vi, p. 53).

Karen wants to love—to live, and perhaps that is one of the reasons she runs off with Shar, a race car driver. But the small towns Karen visits are even more stagnant than her own home. Although
it is not clear whether the villages on the racing circuit are also within Eden County, they retain the same ominous atmosphere. In Skyerdale, the villagers reverently celebrate the auto race and fiercely enjoy their fun. When one of the overloaded grandstands collapses and people are crushed, the rustics ignore the accident and continue to watch the race "drinking beer and eating chicken" (xi, p. 106), waiting for a more spectacular accident on the track. The dancers in the local bar writhe in some violent ritual. Cherry River, the other city on the tour, exists only to suck money from the tourists. There, we are given a rather grim portrait of a freak show, not unlike the collection of drifters and hangers-on who frequent the town. Grimly lurking beneath the festive atmosphere of the boardwalk filled with cheap night clubs and flop houses are soothing racial tensions.

Just who or what does Karen, the innocent, need to escape from? For the most part, she feels safe in her father's home and enjoys the domesticity of church and Sunday family dinners. At the same time, Mr. Herz is a strict, domineering father and his house is a fortress to which seventeen-year-old Karen has already retired. Hers is of legendary stature in Pools Brook. He is a giant of a man (iii, p. 26), who has already worn out four wives. As a well-to-do land owner and farmer, Herz commands respect from his community and family. When he knocks on the hermit's door, the whole "shanty seem[s] to tremble beneath his blow" (4, p. 9). Karen is his favorite child, and it is suggested that she has quit high school to take care of him. She loves yet fears her demanding father.

In fact, the suspense of this gothic novel is infused by a command
that Hers gives his daughter. Shocked to discover that Karen has
taken a drive with Shar, Hers fights the young man to protect Karen’s
reputation. After Hers is wounded and apparently dying, Karen tries to
comfort him. Instead, the old man commands Karen: “Get him . . .
Don’t come to me until you get him. Kill him. Kill him!” (v, p. 50).
Karen does leave her wounded father to follow Shar, but does she intend
to “get him” or become his lover or both?

Like most gothic novels, With Shudderings Fall has its intruder,
and Shar is the flashy flatlander who forces his way into Karen’s life.
Shar is a threat to the Herses and especially to Karen when she
realizes that his presence so turns her world upside down that things
are “Never the same again!” (v, p. 49). Shar cunningly tricks Karen
into going on a ride with him. Unanimously he senses the control Hers
holds over her, and Shar coaxes her along by saying that her father
wants Karen to accompany Shar. Once she repels Shar’s sexual advances,
Shar assures Hers that Karen was the seducer. Perhaps Shar’s villainy
can be attributed to his flatland life-style, but a chilling fact about
Shar is that he is not really an outsider; he was born in Peals Brook.

Shar has returned to Elen County to bury his father, the crazy old
hermit. Perhaps Shar was an innocent at one time and his father may
have been a tyrant. Shar continually ran away from home and the hermit’s
name—Rule—suggests that Shar was a tortured innocent. Why the racer
returns to his father’s deathbed is unclear; Shar has not been home in
fourteen years. Shar appears to be obliterating the past which haunts
him by making sure his father is dead. After Rule’s death, Shar sets
fire to the shanty with the corpse inside in an effort to finally rid
himself of his personal history. It is also quite possible that Shar hurried his father's death and torches the cabin to destroy any inor-
minating evidence.

Most of the time, Shar hardly seems an innocent; in fact, he seems barely human in his actions and is often described with animal imagery. For example, upon their first meeting, he reminds Karen of "a hawk, one of the soiled, shabby birds of prey that circled the skies" (ii, p. 24). Unsettling violence pervades Shar's essence. After setting Rule's cabin afire, Shar struggles with and leaves Hers for dead. There is an indication that Shar's attack on Hers is necessary for Shar to totally destroy his past; he might be Hers's illegitimate son. During one race, Shar forces another driver off the track and the accident shears the other's head off (xi, p. 100). To Shar, even the act of love is aggression, not affection. During one bout of passion in a cemetery, he rages at Karen, "'I'd like to set you on fire like I did to him!'" (xii, p. 122). Is Shar the gothic villain of this novel?

There is a definite tyrannical figure in Shar's life—Max, Shar's backer. Perhaps Max is Shar's corrupter because of the unlimited funds, praise, and whores Max offers him. Max is one of Cates's typical grotesques, an overweight magalomaniac of suspicious origins. In fact, he looks like Cates's version of the spy thriller's The Fat Man. Max lives vicariously or rather voyeuristically on Shar's exploits on the track and in the bedroom. Max probably has his own sexual desires for Shar. A typical conversation between Max and Shar would include Max's usual question: "'Did you make her happy?" and Shar would reply, "'You're goddamned right I did!'" (ix, p. 83). Max is a type of
"blood-sucker" who squeezes information out of people and then uses the knowledge to control their lives. Karen also almost falls victim to Max's "subtle probing into her mind, his groping for her secret" (x, p. 87).

As it turns out, Shar's obsession is not auto racing but Karen. Unable to understand their love, he feels possessed by her. To prepare himself for a race, Shar must force himself to cleanse Karen from his mind. At times, Shar admits that Karen sucks him to death and that the only way to be free of her is to kill her. When they make love, Shar knows that he is often hurting Karen, but he continues in the same manner. Shar's obsession with Karen appears brutally sadistic, but this kind of love relationship will reappear in Cates's novels as she explores "the disorienting, frightening, sometimes ennobling, sometimes debaseing power of love and sex and the entangling relationships produced by these explosive forces."  

Has Karen escaped from the tyranny of her father only to become the victim of another man or men? All through her childhood, Karen has been victimized by boys teasing her, but she does little to resist Shar's influence. After she makes the choice to run away with him, she is his constant companion, even though he has almost destroyed her health and sanity (xi, p. 80). It would seem that Shar is the one who possesses her because once Karen is paid off by Max, she still returns to Shar as if magnetically drawn. She allows the painful sexual encounter to take place, even when Shar has induced a miscarriage.

Karen is not entirely a victim because she half realizes the control she holds over Shar. After all, she is aware of the power she
has over other men. One thwarted lover calls Karen "poison" and accuses her of trying "to ruin" him and drive him "crazy" (iii, p. 33). Before her escape from Poole's Brook, she treats everyone but her father with a particular coldness. In fact, "she was proud of her ability to withdraw from the presence of others so completely that her indifference was not even feigned" (ii, p. 18). Even though Shar is her lover, Karen cannot express the kind of love he requires of her. Karen's inability enrages Shar, but that is Karen's inscrutable seductive power; men allow her to become very close to them, but she never allows them to penetrate her indifferent exterior. Karen is a fatal woman, "a prototypical Oates heroine, passive yet destructive" in her gentle passivity. When Shar offers to marry her, Karen's rejection goads Shar into committing a track suicide, which sets off the violence which erupts into the riot of Cherry River. Shar is only an innocent when it comes to Karen; to flee her power over him, he must kill himself.

Probably the most gothic scene of With Shuddering Fall is Shar's accident and the aftermath. Oates has a particular fondness for both introducing and concluding her novels with gruesome, destructive scenes. However, the chapter in which Shar kills himself is not so horrific. Instead, the suspense is built up through his preparation in doing so. The pace of the narrative of the chapter is slow at first as the scene of the race is set. Then the tempo picks up during the actual race. Oates adds short sentence upon short sentence. Shar readies himself for his death by attempting to shed his protective clothing and jockeys for a position against Vanilla Jones, a black racer. The chapter simply ends when "the car smashed headlong into the
After the crash, the tawdry atmosphere of Cherry River becomes a nightmare of a riot—a race riot. Supposedly, the violence begins because it appeared that Vanilla Jones has forced Shar's car off the track. On the other hand, Gates suggests through Max that the whole incident is Karen's fault. Taking the accident as a racial insult, the white townspeople grab makeshift weapons—chair legs, broken bottles, fishing spears—to begin the counter-attack. Before the riot ends, a Negro tenement is burned, Max's posh motel is trampled down, and men, women and children, black and white, lie wounded and possibly dying in the streets. Is this the result of Karen's unleashed power? Possibly, but still hemorrhaging from her miscarriage, Karen wanders out into the street and is kicked unconscious by three white boys.

As if this is not gruesome enough, the next chapter finds Karen committed to a state mental institution. Even before she ran away from home, Karen was considered "queer in the head" (iii, p. 35). Because of her confinement, in what appears to be a very gothic fortress with "towers and points of battlement that suggested the Middle Ages" (xxi, p. 205), Karen could easily be viewed as a victim, now dreaming of Shar's powerful body. Yet at the same time, Karen also can be seen in her role as a fatal woman.

She becomes well enough to return to her father's home, having accomplished what her requested—killing Shar. Even before Karen left Cherry River, Max has accused Karen of being a "murderer" of setting "a trap, an elaborate trap—an insane trap" to destroy Shar. She accepts her guilt: "I couldn't help it," but feels no remorse.
After her return home, Karen is all too aware of the powers she holds and her potential for destruction. She is proud of her experience which makes her an object of public disapproval. Not only is she able to get her now enfeebled father to forgive all, but she calculates hurrying his death for "he is a cruel, ignorant old man who has always disguised himself with strength" (xxiii, p. 222). She also realizes the sexual power she could unleash, starting by seducing the hired men and her brother-in-law and making her sister and her husband "tear each other apart" (xxiii, pp. 221-222).

Despite all, Karen has returned to the same barren landscape from which she had escaped. Little has changed; Pools Brook is still bare and cold, and Karen is still her father's little girl. Did Karen gain anything from her flight? She is allowed a life she had originally desired—to remain in her father's home, never marry, and be buried in the family plot (ii, pp. 31-33). It may be true that Karen has suffered and changed; after all, she is no longer sexually innocent. Yet in the end, Karen is still an innocent or a maiden in distress. Barely controlled, her calculations are those of a mad woman. She is only on the verge of sanity because she views her experience as akin to Christ's and everything has the quality of a dream. The landscape is as empty and cold as Karen's mind: "the Glen River, frosted even and white, rocks bare and cold in the colorless light, trees scorn of leaves, twigs and branches shocked into rigidity" (xxii, p. 212). Gates concludes her first novel with a sense of despair. The only escape from Glen County is death, for insanity does not save Karen.

Obviously, *With Shuddering Fall* is Gates's first novel; it lacks
narrative finesse and well-developed characters. Even though her characters lack depth and motivation, they are typical gothic types—the fleeing innocent, the clutching tyrant, and the fatal woman. Of course the ambiguity of these roles, the ambiguity between innocence and knowledge, makes this a modern gothic. Although the novel is a kind of a "3-movie auto-race story," Gates has imbued With Shuddering Fall with structural patterns and thematic concerns which will recur in her gothic novels. The innocent will continue to flee from forces greater than he, and a love relationship will continue to be a major conflict or the stage for violence. More often than not, Gates will expose the raw violence that is crouching beneath the surface of the community, whether it be the community of family or city. All of this will be set in a reflective landscape, which can become the innocent's worst antagonist.

II. On A Garden of Earthly Delights

Gates's next gothic novel, A Garden of Earthly Delights, is also her next novel and is reminiscent of With Shuddering Fall because of similar themes, characters, and setting. Again, there are innocents who need to escape from tyrannical parents, while other characters vie for possession of one another. Again, Eben County is the primary setting.

There may be a problem with characterizing A Garden as a gothic novel because some critics prefer to view it as "a naturalistic exposé of the stultifying conditions of rural poverty." This novel could
easily be labeled as naturalistic because of the slow pace Oates develops through so many descriptive details of setting and character. In a sense, the characters are more realistic than those of *With Shuddering Fall* because Oates employs more explanation regarding their motivation. Yet the accumulation of details is one of Oates’s gothic techniques. By heaping on the grotesque details, the author is able to depict rural America as a truly ghastly landscape, all the more horrible because it is a real, not a fictional setting.

Although *A Garden* does not commence in Eilen County, the last three-fourths of the novel is dependent upon the Eilen locals. The first part of the novel, "Carleton," follows Carleton Walpole’s migrant worker family throughout America’s farmlands. Whether in New Jersey or South Carolina, Texas or Florida, the American countryside is a cruel, ugly place, especially for the homeless. The migratory workers are scorned by locals and live in unsanitary tents or dirt-floor shanties, while their babies are inspected by curious rats. When a member of Carleton’s family, Clara, finally does settle in Eilen County, her quality of living may improve, but not the landscape nor the attitude of the neighbors. Eilen County is still inhospitable. Eilen comes to represent all of America: where there is a wide division between the middle class and the poor, between the accepted and the perpetual outsider; where the countryside is still man’s enemy; and where the only way for a man to improve himself is to get the better of his neighbor. In Eilen County, as in all of rural America, the psychological limitations of the characters are associated with their rural upbringing.
Perhaps it would be accurate to suggest that the villain of this
gothic novel is none other than the America of the 1930's and 40's.
A Garden of Earthly Delights has been described as "the American
Dream" becoming a Nightmare. After all, Garleton's daughter, Clara,
will do anything to escape her parents' vagabond life style, but she
does not find being a landowner's wife all that secure. America is a
hostile landscape in which violence is pervasive. The novel opens on
one of Oates's typically chaotic introductions—a traffic accident,
which results in Clara's birth. Her whole life is full of violent
happenings: Clara's father cannot resist an argument or a fight with
co-workers and ends up knife his best friend to death; Clara's brother's
favorite pastime is biting the heads off live birds. While in Alien
County, Clara's best girl friend is strangled to death by her lover,
a hunting accident results in the death of one of Clara's stepsons,
and her own son commits suicide.

As usual, Oates ironically contrasts the stereotypical ideal of
the neighborly small town with that of Alien County. Clearly, Oates
wants the reader to draw some contrasts between Tintern, the town
Clara settles in, and Wordsworth's Tintern of "Tintern Abbey." Clara's innocence, sexual or otherwise, is soon lost when she moves to
Alien County. Nor does Clara cherish fond memories of Tintern. When
she becomes the leading citizen's mistress, she is ill-treated by the
townsmen, and her friends are forbidden to visit her (II, viii, p.
225). When Clara seeks emergency aid for her sick baby, the townspeople
refuse to help her, but are quite willing to taunt her. Even when
Clara does marry the wealthiest man in town, Curt Revere, the citizens
of Tintern still treat her with disdain. Even so, Tintern, with its false fronts and sleazy five-and-dime is Clara's idea of success.

Although the three parts of the novel are titled after three of the men in Clara's life, Clara Walpole Revere is clearly the main character of A Garden. The novel traces her life from birth to mid-forties. Unlike Karen Hers of With Shuddering Fall, Clara, for the most part, is in control of her life. As the antithesis to Karen, Clara represents the other kind of Oates's major woman characters—strong-willed and mostly self-seeking. Clara is an almost mythic being, a kind of earth-goddess, whose appearance is ageless. She claims to have never been a child (I, iv, p. 107). Vegetation imagery is associated with Clara, and often she is found working in her garden or passing judgments in her "garden room." To further suggest her mythic "powers," Clara is also often accompanied by a familiar spirit—a cat. Like Karen, Clara has a certain influence over men—but Clara is always very aware of her powers.

Instead of trying to escape inhospitable Rhén County, Clara would rather remain within the protected fortress of a home a man like her husband can provide for her. In fact, the Revere homestead, not unlike a castle, commands a view of Rhén valley. Clara spends her waking hours pursuing the American Dream of success in Tintern. The only time Clara wants to leave the town is for shopping trips or rendezvous in Hamilton, the nearby industrial town. Despite its location in the rural countryside, Hamilton is depicted as a city plagued by crime and other problems, which Oates will explore in her later novels set in cities. Whether Clara is decorating her orange-
crate vanity with bunting or purchasing Oriental rugs, she is deter-
mined to overcome her past "by assimilating into and triumphing over the
dominant culture" no matter how "imbecile or cheap and common" the
result.23 Faced with marrying a bootlegger or the next available
traveling salesman, Clara seduces Revere, the richest man in town,
who just happens to be married. Clara is not the sole conspirator;
after all, Revere is already attracted to the sixteen-year-old Clara
because she reminds him of his first love (II, vi, p. 203). By
becoming Revere's mistress and later his wife, Clara believes she has
achieved success.

Perhaps Clara cannot be so readily accused of being treacherously
self-seeking. After all, the main reason Clara entices Revere is that
she needs someone to care for her and her unborn child. Times being what
they were, the wages Clara earns at the five-and-dime barely pay for
her room and tinselly, makeshift furnishings. After being impreg-
nated and forsaken by Lowry, the man who rescued her from the migratory
camp, Clara cannot support herself. Because the unborn baby is "the
only thing she really owned," Clara vows "she would betray anybody for
this baby; she would even kill if she had to" (II, viii, pp. 227, 236).
Yet her attitude still can be considered selfish. Being a kept woman
has its renumeration and marrying Revere gives Clara financial power
and social standing; Revere's position provides sanctuary in a kind of
paradise for Clara. Even if she is giving up some freedom for her son,
Steven, she will profit in the deal. Despite her self-sacrifice, Clara
sees her son as "the one thing she had to hate, the only thing that had
lost her Lowry" (II, x, p. 281).
Claire's control over men is not her "beauty or her vulgarity but her appropriation of stereotypical male behavior that makes her so destructive,"24 she is able to use men's attraction for her against them. Even as a little girl, Claire is her father's favorite; when she runs away, Carleton dies trying to find her. Her rescuer, Lowry, resists Claire's sexuality for as long as he can until he succumbs to her constant pleas and banter. Claire prides herself that Beere falls in love with her "the way another man falls into a swamp" (II, viii, p. 237). She also has an undisclosed number of pre- and extra-marital affairs; uncountable because the narrative shifts from Claire's to Swan's point of view. Claire is even able to dispose of one of her steps because of his open sexual attraction to her; he is asked to leave home. Only Swan refuses to completely yield to his mother because he can see just how manipulative she is.

Claire is hardly a maiden in distress who needs to flee from a tyrant. True, she does run away from "home" because her drunken father beat her, but she never had been treated so unjustly by him before. Instead, Claire is actually trying to escape the crushing system of poverty, a life filled with little security, unwanted children, and backbreaking toil for minimal wages. Soon after meeting Lowry, Claire insists she wants something more than babies, but she doesn't know what (II, i, p. 137).

Like Karen Herz, Claire escapes one man to become the apparent victim of another. Very similar in character-mold to Sharr in With Shuddering Fall, Lowry is Claire's intruder. Although Lowry nobly rescues Claire, gets her a job and wants to see her educated, Claire feels
he treats her shabbily. She never knows when he will appear, he gets her pregnant, leaves the country, and arrives four years later, expecting Clara to run away with him again. The strange thing about Lowry is that he reminds Clara of her father. Although incest is almost an accepted practice in Clara's migratory camp, it had never occurred between Clara and Carleton.25 Lowry is Clara's passionate obsession. While under Lowry's spell, Clara is in a dream world. Long after she is Revere's wife, she still imagines it is Lowry making love to her. Clara even has a liaison with a drifter she picks up in a gas station because "his height and his slouched shoulders had made her think of Lowry" (II, ix, p. 253). Clara intends to get even with Lowry because he left her, and perhaps she does get even with him when refusing to go away with him the second time; but Lowry haunts Clara the rest of her life.

Despite her awareness, Clara is quite convincing in her role as an innocent victim, especially where Revere is concerned. She leads Revere to believe that Lowry's baby is his own and allows Revere to "make up for everything" the rest of his life (II, viii, p. 228). Curt Revere is one of those mythical Rhinelanders, like Mr. Hertz, who may be making underhanded money but is respected by the community for that money. Clara is Revere's obsession, and his infatuation for her leads to his demise. Revere permits Clara to take over his household a month after his wife's death and in the end to rid Revere of his sons. Although he does not realize it, Revere is also a victim, a victim of a fatal woman—Clara.

Once Revere marries Clara, she becomes a fairy-tale version of the
wicked stepmother—harsh but seductive. Revere's three sons are jealous of and in awe of Clara's manipulation of their stern, authoritarian father. Her word carries even more weight than their father's because Clara can make Revere change his mind. She runs around the house immodestly: "not always bothering to see what I was buttoned" (III, vi, p. 380). When the oldest son, Clark, drunkenly hugs her one night, Clara banishes him from the house (III, viii, p. 407). True to wicked stepmother fashion, Clara plots her son's way to the top of Revere's fortune. In fact, one of the major points of suspense is developed when Clara and seven-year-old Swan first move into the Revere mansion. Already she tells him: "'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!" (III, i, p. 300). And Clara's prophecy comes true, no matter how odd it is to seek revenge by becoming a "best son."

Although it is an old technique, Cates often uses a prediction or a family curse to build suspense throughout her novels. In Shuddering Falls, Hera's request that Karen kill Shax took the form of prophecy, and other threatening foreshadowings will be made in later novels. Another prediction in A Garden, which is made when Swan is only four, is even more chilling than Clara's. As if to curse Clara and her child for not coming with him, Lowry prophesies to Swan:

"'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" (II, x, p. 261). Not only is Swan partially responsible for his stepsister's death, but Swan inadvertently kills his stepfather also.
Even though Clara is the main character of the novel, the point of view switches to Swan in the third section. More than one critic finds Swan a weak character, but in contrast to Clara, everyone is weak. Swan is an extremely bright, sensitive child, who at the age of seven can figure out that the shadowy figure of Lowry is his father, not Revere. Once he realizes this, Swan vows to protect his mother’s secret (III, i, p. 303). He grows up to be Revere’s right hand man, somewhat dazed but protective of his position.

By no means is Swan as calculating as his mother; even so, he uncannily rides himself of his rivals for the Revere fortune. In a freak hunting accident, Swan is responsible for his favorite stepbrother’s death. Swan hates the very idea of hunting or even eating meat because of the “red, thin trickles of watery blood that got into your potatoes” (III, iii, p. 346). Swan only goes hunting because the sport is a required art for being a Revere. Somehow during some horse-play, Robert’s gun goes off and kills him, and everyone thinks Swan pulled the trigger. In a sense, Swan also ride himself of another rival that day, for in an effort to rescue Robert, Clara miscarries.

At the age of nine, Swan has earned a reputation as a murderer. His classmates, cousins, and even his teachers treat him with “suspicious curiosity” (III, vi, p. 380) and distant respect. Clara insists that Swan’s stepbrother, Jonathan, be responsible for Swan at school. Trying to win over Jonathan’s trust, Swan offers him a jackknife, and so frightens Jonathan that “his face went white” and he swerves the car off the road (III, vi, p. 381). Scared of Swan and
wanting nothing to do with his family or his father's "where," Jonathan disappears from Tintern. In an effort to rid Swan of his last rival, Clara threw the overly-energetic Clark out of the house.

Despite all of the land, money, and position he will inherit from Revere, the twenty-six-year-old Swan feels he has no right to it. The rugged, murky landscape of Glen County is representative of Swan's inner landscape, chaotic and hostile. Although he is responsible for large tracts of land, Swan is stifled by Glen County. The reason for Swan's hatred of Tintern and all that it represents to Clara is not his constant striving to please his stepfather, but the contempt Swan feels for his mother. He has known of Clara's extra-marital affairs and manipulative manner for years. More than anyone in the novel, Swan is an innocent who needs to escape from a tyrannical force—his mother. Not only has Clara helped remove Swan's rivals and plotted his inheritance, but she has "poisoned her son against her" in the process.\(^7\) Clara's original love for Swan has become nothing more than her greed for success.

In a typical Catesian manner, the novel ends with violent action—a murder and a suicide. For one reason or another, Swan decides to get rid of Clara and himself. This is the point in the novel when normal life becomes a nightmare. Robert's death was an accident, but there seems to be no logical motive behind Swan's assassination. Perhaps his motivation is a result of a tryst between him and his cousin, Deborah. At the climax of their love-making, "Clara's face flIckered in and out of his mind's eye" (III, x, p. 435). Swan goes to his parents' house, wielding a gun, and tries to explain the necessity
of Clara's murder to Revere. Frightened and lacking in beauty but not control, Clara tries to taunt Swan out of the fatal act: "'No, you're not going to shoot me . . . . You can't pull the trigger! You're weak, that's what I know about you, that's my secret about you—you're weak just like he was . . . . You're just like him [Lowry]'" (III, x, p. 436). Even so, Swan carefully aims and mistakenly kills Revere. Ironically, Swan, who has always been a bad shot, thinks he has killed Clara and then shoots himself.

The final chapter indicates just how little power Clara has. Soon after Swan's rampage, she is sent to a nursing home because she has lost control of her mind and body. Never improving, Clara must remain in the nursing home, where she is reduced to watching hours of television, even when Clark visits her. Clara enjoys the violent programs the most, the shows with "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" (III, ii, p. 440). Clara, like Karen Hart, has become insane. At the end of her life, Clara is not so different from her mother, who from hard labor and many childbirths "had had no mind at all" (I, v, p. 51) by the time she died. Clara is unable to return to the Revere farm because it has been sold. Clara, who had worked so unsungly to achieve her position as Revere's wife, has been expelled from her garden of Eden.

The landscape will continue to be a prominent feature in Oates's novels, and in With Shuddering Fall and A Garden of Earthly Delights, Eden County has held various meanings. To those who attempt to possess
the land, Herr and Curt Revere, the rugged landscape is a menacing commodity that needs to be tamed and conquered. To Clara, Rien is a symbol for the American Dream, which she struggles to attain and maintain. To Shan, Karen, and Sean, Rien is a stagnant imprisonment, a link to their limited pasts, an antagonist from which they must flee, even if death is the only escape. And to Cates, Rien County is rural America, a hostile environment, which in the end destroys and conquers all.

Notes for Chapter One

1 Joanne V. Creighton, Joyce Carol Oates (Boston: Twayne-C. K. Hall, 1979), p. 27.


5 The novels primarily set in Rien include With Shuddering Fall, A Garden of Earthly Delights, Childwold, The Son of the Hanging, and Bellefleur.


8 Waller, Dreaming, p. 89.

9 With Shuddering Fall (1964 rpt. Greenwich Conn.: Fawcett, 1971), ch. 1, p. 6. Hereafter the chapter and page references are cited in the text.


12 Gates is dredging up a very gothic motif—incest, when he mentions to Karen: "For all I know Ezra could of been my father . . . Your old man got around a lot thirty years ago—did you know that?" (iv, p. 39).

13 James McGonagay, rev. of With Shuddering Fall, Epoch 14 (1964), 186.

14 Creighton, Oates, p. 40.

15 Waller, Dreaming, p. 99.


17 Creighton, Oates, p. 47.

18 Waller, Dreaming, p. 102.


20 See note 16.

21 Madden, p. 45.

22 Waller, Dreaming, p. 86.

23 Creighton, Oates, p. 52.

24 Waller, Dreaming, p. 106.

25 In Part I, chapter 7, the members of Carleton's camp try to protect bert from the authorities because he has impregnated his daughter.

26 Both Waller, Dreaming, p. 111; and Peg Stanger, "Stone, Berry,

Chapter Two

Urban Gothic—Them

An even more hostile landscape than the countryside is the modern city, and Oates sets her next five novels there. At first it might be difficult to picture the city as gothic. After all, there are very few decaying castles, churning tuns, or mysterious forests located in the city. In fact, the American city “was founmed as a protection against violence from outside.” Yet this supposedly secure closed world is where human pressures and passions boil into monstrous urges, where violence breeds under cramped, secretive conditions, where fear is a daily reaction to life. All too often, the victims who wander into the depths of the city, such as Dr. Lebanon in “The Sacrifice” (1977), never come out.

Numerous short stories and at least two of Oates’s novels, Them (1969) and Do With Me What You Will (1973), are set in Detroit, a city which has become a “central symbol in Oates’s vision.” Having lived there for about five years and across the Canadian border in Windsor off and on for approximately ten years, Oates is well-acquainted with Detroit, which she describes as “a city so transparent ‘that one can see it ticking.’” A witness to the rising social and racial tensions which culminated in the race riots of 1967, Oates exposes the Detroit in Them as a repulsive, dangerous city. If Oates views Detroit as a
representative American city, then there is no security to be found in a closed world. The city comes to be like an "old haunted castle as it transforms dreams of human progression and immortality to a night-
mare of decay and death." And as the city pulsates and grows, it becomes more difficult for the innocent residents, especially the poor, to escape from the imprisoning social and economic structures around them.

Unlike the violence and madness of Oates's earlier short stories and novels, made remote because of the setting in mythical Blen County, Oates holds nothing back in her portrayal of Detroit in Them. Detroit is a turbulent, throbbing city of brutal domestic quarrels and street fights. Perhaps because of Oates's narrative precision in presenting a realistic portrait of Detroit at the time, Them has been considered her best novel. This rating, of course, may be debatable, but Them did win The National Book Award in Fiction in 1970.

There has been some difficulty in labeling the genre of Them—is it a naturalistic or a gothic novel? Oates has contributed to this controversy herself. In the "Author's Note," Oates indicates that the novel "is a work of history in fictional form," which suggests that Them is a naturalistic or realistic work. Oates goes on to claim that the novel is based upon one of her University of Detroit student's recollections. She even includes two of Maureen Wendall's letters within the narrative. In an interview, Oates later confesses that the student and her memories are fictional. The interviewer suggests that them is, rather, a parody of naturalism because of the incessant accumulation of details.
The technique of attributing one's narrative to another storyteller is not a naturalistic but a gothic device. In his preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole claims to have found his untranslated work in someone else's library, a device which excuses Walpole's responsibility for the narrative. In the same manner, Oates tries to shirk any personal responsibility for what she has written by claiming them is the product of another narrator. She is also assuring her reader that the narrative is realistic because of her student's actual existence. In fact, Oates insists that "the various sordid and shocking events of semin life, detailed in other naturalistic works, have been understated here, mainly because of my fear that too much reality would become unbearable" (Author's Note).

Yet in the same "Author's Note," Oates becomes mystical in her explanation: "Their lives pressed upon mine eerily . . . Because their world was so remote from me it entered me with tremendous power, and in a sense the novel wrote itself." In her note to the review copies of *them*, Oates offers her definition of gothicism: "Gothicism, whatever it is, is not a literary tradition so much as a fairly realistic assessment of modern life." Oates seems to want her novel read as both naturalistic and gothic, which at first seems paradoxical, but *them* is a very gothic novel, even if it is difficult to accept the metaphor of Detroit as an "old haunted castle." The plot follows two generations of a family cursed by poverty. When they move to the decaying city, the Wendalls live in a nightmare of continual dread punctuated by irrational violence, intruded upon by an occasional grotesque. The Wendalls' struggle for survival amidst the varying
disasters and dangers is the stuff of urban gothic.

Just who is the "them" to which the title refers? If the "Author's Note" is the least bit reliable, Cates indicates that "them" is truly about a specific "them" and not just a literary technique of pointing to us all." But just who is this "specific "them"? Quite possibly, "them" refers to any type of higher authority, such as a parent, the government, the nation, or the people responsible for the city of Detroit. Yet each time one of the Wendalls mentions "them," it is another member of the family. Or maybe just Loretta and her children, Maureen and Jules, not the rest of the family, are "them," lost, "passive humans to whom things happen." Or perhaps "them" is the city of Detroit. Despite the "Author's Note," it seems that the "them" is not so "specific" and is a "literary technique" perhaps "pointing to us all."

Rage opens in expected Cates fashion—with irrational violence—but this time in an unnamed city. Loretta Botsford, who was able to sneak her boyfriend Bernie into her bedroom, awakens to "a loud sharp noise." For some reason, Loretta's brother has shot her boyfriend through the brain from which "a stream of blood was seeping into the pillow" (I, ii, p. 22). The hysterical Loretta dashes into the early morning streets looking for some kind of help, frightened that Bernie's family is going to get even with her. But the only assistance she finds is a neighborhood kid who has recently become a cop. Going with Loretta, the policeman takes one look at the situation, scolds her for being so stupid, and then forces her to have sex with him on the kitchen table. At that moment, sixteen-year-old Loretta
realizes it "was the end of her youth" (I, ii, p. 42).

Howard Wendall, the attendant cop, disposes of the corpse and he and Loretta soon marry. Loretta is grateful to put her old life, which included caring for her crazy, alcoholic father, behind her. Pregnant and almost happy in her new home, Loretta hopes to live there forever. Unfortunately, Howard disgraces his whole family by being kicked off the police force, and the entire Wendall clan moves to the country.

In these few chapters set in the country, Gates seems to be assuring her reader that she has not changed her mind about rural America. It is still an unsettling environment populated by deranged characters. Although Mama Wendall promises Loretta that "the country is a better place than that smelly city for a baby" (I, v, p. 57), the old lady is mistaken. The family ends up on a broken-down farm inhabited by none other than a crazy old hermit. The countryside is turbulent, filled with lightning, storms, and natural disasters. It is hardly the ideal environment for children, especially Jules, to grow up in. Jules, the oldest, constantly runs away through the "distant hills and soulless dirt roads" (I, vi, p. 64), coming home bloody and bruised, to be disciplined with a switch until he bleeds. The major source of entertainment is a fiery airplane crash in which a passenger's head is split in two. Loretta hates the countryside, preferring "the lovely dirty city ... its dirty air ... and its scrubby open parks where anyone might meet" (I, v, p. 57). So one day while Howard is off to war, Loretta packs up her three kids and moves to Detroit.

Loretta is similar to Clare in *A Garden* when it comes to men, her desire for material objects, and her ability to adapt to every new
situation. Loretta is also similar to her nagging mother-in-law, which probably contributes to each woman's antipathy toward the other. When Loretta is not working one of her pink collar jobs, she amuses herself by going to the movies or watching television, reading romance magazines, or playing cards and drinking beer. For the most part, Loretta could be satisfied with her life in Detroit, but after one of the numerous arguments with Howard, she insists: "I wasn't meant to be like this . . . I wasn't always like this." She shrilly adds: "There was a man who got killed because of me, shot right in the head, shot dead, and it happened because of me!" (II, ix, pp. 107-108).

Loretta is not exactly an innocent in distress nor a fatal temptress. She has always been fairly street-wise, but perhaps a little too vulnerable when it comes to men. Needing money when they first move to Detroit, Loretta mistakenly solicits an undercover cop and is arrested. Unlike Clara, no man is hopelessly in love with Loretta. Each time Loretta brings a new boyfriend home, her children grimace: "Jesus, another baby on the way!" (II, iv, p. 249). After Loretta's husband dies in an industrial accident, her mother-in-law is sure she is "running around with every man she can get!" (II, xiii, p. 147).

Loretta is determined to enjoy her life, despite her mistakes. She does what she can with the little talent she has. Even when she is burned out of her home by the riots, she is glad to have escaped with her life and tries to interest another riot victim—a widower—in her. Although she is a victim, Loretta is also a survivor.

When Loretta moves her family to Detroit, she does not think of the consequences, only of escaping her oppressive mother-in-law and the
too-open countryside. She prefers the closed world of the city or "airless boxed-in streets" (I, vii, p. 73), where she thinks she will have more control over her life. Yet Detroit, "a kind of stretched-out hole, a hole with a horizon" (II, ii, p. 215), is a chaotic maze where things are always changing. The Wendalls move from one broken-down apartment to another. It always seems that one or another of the children is missing or is entangled with the law. Betty, the youngest, who at the age of eleven leads her own gang, is especially a troublemaker. Even the family dinners are a confused arena of insults and accusations.

True, the city may seem magnificent to Loretta because of "its municipal buildings of fake marble and its department stores and elevators" (I, vi, p. 57), which are a kind of tribute to modern man's ingenuity. Yet Gates's city is a barbaric locale of street violence, where Negroes are beaten up and little girls are abducted and raped and no one cares or does anything about it—a city in which the mum bloody their students' noses and grandchildren push their grandmothers down the steps. Detroit of the 1950's and '60's is desolate of humanity, although it is filled with people. No one is unique; rather, everyone is lost in a sea of anonymity.

If we return to the gothic metaphor of the city as "an old haunted castle," then Detroit is redolent with decay and death. Not only is the city heading toward the destruction of the riots, but it is where "the human spirit dies." The Wendalls are frustrated in their attempts to become middle class. Once they find a comfortable home, they must vacate for an incoming park, only no park ever appears.
Loretta's first husband, Howard, is a bulking alcoholic, who finds no shred of pleasure in his family or job (and her second husband is not much different). When Maureen is beaten up, she is no more than an animal, who cannot think or care for herself. It takes her thirteen months to snap out of her stupor.

Out of the depths of Detroit comes an assorted number of grotesques—crooked cops, runaways, streetwalkers, and various petty thieves. Two of the more peculiar characters are related to the Wendalls. Brock, who is Loretta's brother and who shot her lover, shows up one day as if nothing had ever happened. It seems that he needs a place to stay before he dies of a skin-eating cancer. Samson Wendall, an overweight, loud-mouthed, arrogant millionaire, on the other hand, is the successful uncle; however, his shady business dealings make him no better than a gangster. Jules, by the way, becomes the chauffeur for a shaggy eccentric, who is play-acting as a mobster.

Having no idea of this generous man's occupation, Jules drives him all over Detroit for a few days until he finds his employer in a pool of blood with a butcher knife in hand.

Detroit becomes the antagonist of this gothic novel against whom the main characters, Loretta, Jules, and Maureen, must struggle each day of their lives. The suspense in this novel is established through the layering of violent and chaotic acts which affect not only the Wendalls but other innocent victims as well. Children are sexually molested and murdered; housewives are slashed by a Bible salesman.

While Loretta loses all of her possessions to a fire-bomb and Maureen is beaten senseless by her stepfather, Jules seems to have the worst of
it. He is constantly buffeted around by the forces of the city—in the Children's Shelter, Jules is sexually abused; as a teenager, he is mugged by a policeman; later, he is critically shot by his affluent lover. By the end of them, Jules becomes the perpetrator of violence by killing a policeman during the rioting (III, vii, p. 466). Quite possibly, all of the hostile societal acts are committed as a result of the outlet of personal violence, but the city dwellers would not feel the need for such a release if they did not live in the closed world of the city.

The worst explosion of violence is the riot of 1967, to which Cates apportions a long grisly chapter. Although the Detroit streets have always been precarious, Cates chronicles the reality of a city turned into a nightmare. At that time in her career, this chapter was surely Cates's most spectacularly savage conclusion. Jules wanders through the raging confusion as an almost impartial witness. Around him fly stones, bricks, and shattering glass, while screams of pain or exaltation fill the air. Everywhere people, armed or unarmed, are running, unless they are wounded, like one of Jules's friends, who is being clubbed while his blood gushes "up in a fine spray like a fountain" (III, vii, p. 462). Looting seems to be the major preoccupation, but Jules waits to pillage some cigarettes "until the front door [is] broken so that he could enter in this way, properly" (p. 456). Jules gets a ride with some joy-riding teenagers, despite such road blocks as dead bodies. Doing his own reenacting, Jules kills a policeman, while all around fires burn. Jules finds a value to this violence, although it does not appear to liberate him to his own selfhood.
Instead, Jules sees social transformation: "'Violence can't be singled out from an ordinary day! . . . Everyone must live through it again and again, there's no end to it . . . ." (III, viii, pp. 473-74).

Is it Loretta's bad judgment to have raised her children on such brutal streets? Is it Howard's fault that his family are of the urban poor? Does Maureen's poverty because "the sins of the fathers are visited on their children"? As innocent victims of the city, will Maureen and Jules ever escape the oppressive, hostile streets of their youth?

Jules, perhaps, is the more complicated sibling. More callous than Maureen, Jules's concept of the city is: "All of Detroit is melodramatic, and most lives in Detroit fated to be melodramatic" (II, v, p. 255). Constantly in trouble with one source of authority or another, Jules is always being told that he will "grow up to die in the electric chair." He is initiated into sex at the age of thirteen by an older girl, who romantically proposes: "'I'm gonna cut my initials into you kid!" (I, ix, pp. 83-89). Never on the right side of the law, Jules passes from one job to another. Much like Cates's other male characters so far, Jules denies having a past, instead sensing it as "one of those old hating, comic films in which foolishly dressed people could have felt no pain, no anguish" (I, viii, p.86). Perhaps a contributing factor to Jules's lack of identity is Loretta's belief that he is not a Wendell; rather, Jules is her murdered lover's child. By the end of them, Jules's mind is unstable because of the physical trauma he suffered from his lover's gunshot wound and a drug addiction.
Jules hardly seems a victim of Detroit or of circumstances by the end of the novel. He is a pimp who beats his whore with a twisted coat hanger, a police murderer, and an opportunist who somehow gets himself appointed to "the United Action Against Poverty Program." But this is not the first time we see Jules as a demonic figure. During his father's lifetime, Jules was always planning ways of murdering Howard. When Jules needs quick cash, he thinks nothing of mugging someone and leaving them wounded on the ground. And when Jules wants a woman, he will stop at nothing to possess her.

Jules becomes the intruder in the life of Nadine Greene, a vacuous maiden, who lives in Grosse Point. Jules is so enamored of her image that he follows her around in his florist van and finagles his way into her parents' home. Jules is so bedazzled with the living-space and furnishings that Nadine's wealth becomes a part of her mystique. Although they run off all the way to Texas together, their sexual relationship is not consummated until a few years later after Nadine has married another man. At this time, Jules admits he "was possessed by her, by his love; it was a frantic burn, a pressure like electricity, needing release" (II, xiii, p. 360). Jules is obsessed by Nadine, for even though she shoots him after a day of passion, Jules still wants to marry her.

Nadine is very good at playing the maiden in distress. When she first meets Jules, she tells him how unhappy her life has been while growing up in well-tended suburbia. Actually, it is Nadine who suggests fleeing to Mexico; after all, she is a habitual runaway. Although Jules wants to possess her, Nadine is the one in control. It is she
who allows Jules to caress her but not make love with her; who leaves Jules stranded and sick in Texas; who entices him back, rents an apartment for their tryst, and then asks Jules if he has a disease; and it is she who shoots him, narrowly missing his heart. Nadine enjoys the risk of slumming and of being an adultress, but she cannot maturely accept the responsibilities (II, xiii, pp. 374-75). In more ways than one, Nadine is a fatal woman, who can say "I love you" with absolutely no emotion. Only Jules does not realize her control or her fingernails digging into his flesh while love-making, until it is too late.

Despite Jules's demonic traits, he is as much an innocent as Maureen. As children, they would escape their parents' drunken brawls by "camping out" all night on their apartment roof. Both of them want quiet order in their lives, whether it be a permanent home or seeing salt and pepper shakers set together. One of the most important things in their lives is getting and having money—any amount. Jules dreams of attaining it and all that goes with money—cars, land, and especially, Nadine. Money is just as vital to Maureen, and when she has it, she keeps it all close by in a book, where none of her family would ever look. Most significantly, Maureen and Jules believe that money will be their means of escape from Detroit.

Even more than Jules or Loretta, Maureen is an innocent victim. In her letter to the narrator Gates, she admits to feeling "like a piece of wood being carried along in the water, drifting along, meeting things and passing by, not judging, not calling anybody names" (II, ix, p. 371). Maureen does everything from housework to schoolwork according to the rules, yet things still go wrong for her.
Maureen takes care of the house, makes dinner and gives Loretta’s new husband back rubs. Her mother confuses her with Betty, whilst the mom humiliate her. Every time Loretta argues with her husband, Maureen must relinquish her bed for her mother. Maureen’s favorite place is the library where she can escape from her noisy family whom "she would like to shovel . . . under the veranda, in that dark, musty, leaf-strawn dungeon" (I, x, p. 121). In a desperate attempt to flee her family, Maureen begins to prostitute herself, but to only one man. She dutifully meets with him once or twice a week, accepts his money, and remains innocently unaffected. Unfortunately, Maureen’s stepfather catches her, plunders her money, and badly beats her up. It is only after a year of bed rest that Maureen shyly returns to consciousness.

On the other hand, Maureen, like Jules, is not always a victim. The man that she chooses to fall in love with and marry already has a wife and three children. Maureen deliberately sets out to seduce him because he seems like a good prospect: "settled down, a good man, he has prepared for his future" (III, i, p. 286). Of course her mother and his wife find Maureen’s home-wrecking behavior inexcusable, but Maureen succeeds in marrying her English professor and moves out of Detroit to Dearborn.

Maureen’s desire to become a wife and mother and move to the suburbs is almost as obsessive as Jules’s passion for Madine. Jules warns Maureen that Grosse Point or Dearborn are no different from the city, that "this place . . . can burn down too!" (III, ix, p. 476). Gates also warns about the suburbs in Expensive People (1968) and Do
With Me What You Will, for "if her urban settings reveal the violence and hatred of the poor, the suburbs correspondingly depict the inhumanity and sterility of the rich." For example, Expensive People, which parodies suburbia, is narrated by a psychotic, grotesque teenager, who claims to have killed his mother sniper-style. Surely this narrator is a product of the clean-shaven, manicured lawns of suburbia where lurks "corruption and madness," and where "husbands and wives are nice clean-cut vampires planting stakes in each other's hearts."

Although it has been argued that Jules and Maureen are antithetical to one another because Jules has achieved adulthood through violence and Maureen has not, obviously both Jules and Maureen are victims of Detroit. Each thinks he has gained his freedom from Detroit, but neither has. Jules is going to California with a Poverty Program, and he thinks he will be able to start a thriving business there and make enough money to come back and marry Nadeen. Jules did go west before, but he had to hire himself out as a human guinea pig. Maureen has fulfilled the traditional stereotypical American Dream of becoming a wife with a home in the suburbs. But with a baby on the way, alimony and child payments to the ex-wife, Maureen and her professor-husband will be scraping for a long time. Neither Maureen nor Jules will ever be able to really escape their Detroit pasts.

What makes them so gothic yet also naturalistic is that Jules and Maureen suffer the same curse as their parents. Cates even brings out the similarities between the two generations by presenting parallel scenes, especially of Loretta and Maureen. For example, both Loretta and Maureen resort to prostitution and both women contemplate their
uncertain love—futures in their mirrors (1.1, p. 9 and III, i, p. 383), and each one’s future with men is bleak. Maureen and Jules are not so different from their mother, but are “in fact mirror images of her. Aspiring to rise above the pettiness and stinginess of their lives, they remain victims of their society.”21 The “sins of the fathers are visited on their children,” not only because of their parents’ irresponsibility for bearing and in raising them but also because of the continual entrapment of a socio-economic system. The gothic villain of these is not a tyrannical parent or a haunting grotesque, but the indifference of a large city.

Notes for Chapter Two


3 G. F. Waller, Dreaming America ( Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), p. 36.

4 As quoted in "Writing as a Natural," rev. of them, Time, 70 Oct. 1969, p. 106.


7 Joanne V. Creighton, Joyce Carol Oates (Boston: Twayne-G. K. Hall, 1979), p. 65.


12 them (1969; rpt. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1970), Part I, chapter 2, p. 28. Hereafter the part, chapter and page references are cited in the text.

13 Creighton, Oates, p. 63.

14 Grant, p. 71.

15 Grant, p. 18.

16 Creighton, Oates, p. 72.

17 This was the curve on the Castle of Otranto. Horace Walpole, Preface to the First Edition; rpt. in Seven Masterpieces, p. 16.

18 Grant, p. 74.


20 See note 16.

Chapter Three

The Flight of the Innocents: Wonderland

Joyce Carol Oates's next novel, Wonderland (1971) may appear only nominally gothic in contrast to them. Rather than being the end of a phase, Wonderland seems to be the beginning of a phase in Oates's writing. The importance of the atmosphere of the landscape fades. There are fewer violent acts to grasp the reader's attention and fewer major characters to befuddle the themes. Oates has become more skillful in her presentation of the gothic; the suspense in this novel is developed through the sometimes painful and fearful search for the self.

As usual for Oates, Wonderland received mixed reviews ranging from: "it is in fact the author's most ambitious novel" to the "most involving, the most poetic, the greatest of Oates's novels so far becomes the most deeply flawed of her long works, because it has reached a higher plane than her other books and therefore must fall through a longer distance" to just "Wonderland is bad." Yet all of the critics agree that Wonderland is gothic, and "gothic is the condition of Jesse's life." Gates takes us out of the Poe-esque landscape into Dr. Frankenstein's or Dr. Jekyll's laboratory—the world of medicine where the human body is often no more than a machine.

In a trilogy of novels, Wonderland (medicine), Do With Me What
You Will (law), and TheAssassin (politics), Oates exposes the questionable ethics of so-called professionals. How a writer-college professor could be so well-informed on each (as it turns out) backstabbing profession is surprising, but Oates does try to thoroughly research her topics. In reference to her information for Wonderland, Oates acknowledges:

some years ago I developed a few odd symptoms that necessitated my seeing a doctor, and since there was for a time talk of my being sent to a neurologist, I nervously and superstitiously began reading the relevant journals. What I came upon so chilled me that I must have gotten well as a result... .

Of course some of her readers would claim that Oates has never been mentally sound. Even so, Oates does not present the gray-haired upholder of the Hippocratic oath in the kindest light.

In the original hardback edition of Wonderland, Oates includes an inset before the first chapter, which develops a sense of dread for the whole novel:

A figure appears. Around the corner of a darkened building it appears, running in panic. It runs across a narrow, empty street. At the fence that blocks this street from an expressway below, it stops, its hands go out to the wire fence and begin shaking it. "No! No!"... . At the fence it throws out its arms and screams. Fingers catch the hooks of wire. They tug, strain taut at the wire... .

This figure is not very tall. Its head drops back as if struck by a blow, it screams again, its eyes snap closed like doll’s eyes, its fingers tug wildly at the wire fence. Is the fence electrified, to make this figure jerk so violently? ... . The fence rattles in this silent haze; it is filthy to the touch. Fingers get caught in it, screams are smothered in its rusty cold coils, the skin of one’s face is bruised, broken, rubbed raw by it! ... .

Another figure appears, a man. He has caught sight of
the figure at the fence and runs down to it, holding his side, panting. His breath comes in short, ragged sobs.

He grabs hold of the figure. An embrace, a struggle. The man strikes at the figure, hitting its face. The head jerks away. The eyes snap shut, obedient as doll's eyes."

During the whole novel, the reader must ask the significance of the anonymous figures. Are they symbolic of the novel or are they the characters within? Why is the tormented figure running? Is it running from the man? or from something else? Does the man slap the figure because he is angry? or because the figure is hysterical? This passage sets an uncomfortable tone for the entire novel. Unfortunately, the paperback edition does not contain the same prefatory information, for reasons which will be explained later.

Although it was previously mentioned that this is one of Cates's less violent novels, Wonderland also has one of the most strikingly grisly scenes in her canon. Jesse Hart, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, returns from his after-school job with his father, and the moment the boy opens the door, his dismal life is in total upheaval. The warm, sweet smell he mistook for holiday baking is really the smell of blood oozing from the corpse of his pregnant mother and three siblings. Cates graphically describes the scene as the mangled Jesse takes it all in. He manages to escape through a window just as his murderous father sights Jesse through his shotgun. And Jesse keeps running from his father his entire life.

Of course all seasoned Cates readers would have anticipated the xztoricide, mae-sicidio through the prior intensifying details. That morning, the whole countryside looks "as if it is coming apart—shredding
into molecules of sand or grit. The whole time Jesse is at school and work, he feels uncomfortable as if he is needed at home or as if someone is watching him. Ironically, the holiday surprise that Jesse's father is fiddling with in the car trunk is not a "Christmas tree" or a "small present" but cartridges for the shotgun.

Jesse does spend the rest of his life trying to flee this horrific experience. His insane, mass-murdering father is not the only family member from whom Jesse wants to escape. Jesse also wants to be free of his crowded home life, and the mother of whom he is ashamed. Like Jules and Maureen or Clara, Jesse would also like to escape from his impoverished origins which brand him as a member of the lower class. Jesse Harte, Jesse Pedersen, Jesse Vogel, Dr. Vogel is truly a gothic innocent who needs to flee a mad tyrant for his very existence. Yet this escape leaves Jesse as "the emblem of Catesian nightmarish freedom, which equates freedom with the loss of identity and with the loss of a sustaining world."

As indicated by the discussion of the last three novels, the flight of the innocent is and will continue to be an important element in Cates's novels. Jesse is like the maiden swathèd in filmy white on the cover of a gothic romance, except his whites are surgical gowns. Although the Catesian innocent is usually "running from" something, the movement may also imply a "running towards" or a quest. Jesse is in search of his misplaced identity and Wonderland does belong "to the tradition of the Gothic novel in this country" in "a sense in which every quest for sacred space, upon arrival, transforms the garden into a nightmare." Instead of becoming a unique individual, Jesse
becomes a curious conglomerate of all the successful men he comes to know or become a protégé of. Jesse believes that any man who is not like his father is a successful man. Hence, he admonishes his children's soes with his grandfather's aphorism: "Living begins when crying leaves off!" (III, iii, p. 406) or corrects his daughter's speaking habits according to his adopted father's techniques: "Speak only in complete sentences!" (III, iii, p. 404).

Yet at each new phase in his life, Jesse denies his past, although it already has become a part of him. After his recovery in the hospital, Jesse stays in a succession of relatives' homes and the County Boys' Home, and is later adopted by a physician's family. Like Shar, Jesse prefers to have no link with his past. At one point he even hopes that his cousin would die serving in the Navy because then "there will be one less person to know me the way I used to be!" (I, vii, p. 106). Like Clare, Jesse feels ageless, without a youth because he had had too much to do, too much to think about to enjoy his childhood.

One of the reasons Jesse wants no one to know about his humiliating origins is that he does not want to be considered a freak. He at first believes that his shoulder wound will never heal. A little paranoid after his family's murder, Jesse is sure that everyone is staring and pointing at him, waiting for him to go berserk too. Jesse disassociates himself from his adopted father's headlines: "BOY ELUDED GUN- TOTTING FATHER" because that Jesse no longer exists. So happy to be adopted by the Pedersens, Jesse desperately wants to become a part of the family that he develops their enormous eating habits and becomes grossly obese. So Jesse becomes a freak anyway, a part of his adopt-
ed father's array of shocking newspaper clippings about bizarre accidents and mass murders.

Jesse is not so sure that he wants to be aware of his personality. He is sure, as are Jules and Maureen, that he wants order in his life. The Pedersen household is on an orderly time schedule until Jesse helps his adopted mother run away from her husband. While in medical school, Jesse discovers that what he thinks of as love brings control to his life, or at least when he is in love, he is "not fated to confusion, chaos." (II, i, p. 193). Jesse also believes he can achieve order in his life through the pursuit of knowledge. While in college, he persistently studies, rarely bothering to eat or sleep, and this determination makes him a prominent neurosurgeon, who still is unable to sleep normally. With Jesse, "Gates has created a Faustian character who may not want to be the possessor of all knowledge, but who strikes bargains with demonic grotesques in order to advance his medical career."

Jesse's search for his personality may also be a quest for his father. He allows every male authoritarian figure in his life to adopt him, but each of these figures just happens to be a grotesque. As grotesques, these men exhibit absurd, barely human behavior. Although these characters are slightly more developed than the original gothic villains, their physical appearances correspond to their spiritual states. For example, Dr. Pedersen, who thinks he has superhuman qualities, is a huge man with "an immense stomach. . . . enormous thighs. . . . large ankles, the size of an ordinary man's knees, swelling out against his black socks" (I, iv, p. 77). Each of the
grotesques in Jesse's life wants Jesse to be formed in his image.

After his recovery, Jesse goes to live with his grandfather, a
typical crazy old Osagesian hermit, who had always hated Jesse's father.
The shrunken old man, who smells mostly of death, reluctantly takes
Jesse home. Although he wants nothing to do with the family, Grandpa
Vogel could use a farm hand. But the old man is as "raw and frozen
hard" as his mean-looking farm (I, iii, p. 49). For the most part, he
treats Jesse with a bitter silence, but when he violates it by berating
Jesse's parents, Jesse runs away from yet another father figure.

Jesse is next fated to become the adopted son of Dr. Karl Federsen,
the son the "good doctor" never had. Federsen's own children, Hilda
and Frederick, are mathematical and musical geniuses respectively;
however, they both hate and fear, but mostly hate their prominent
father. Although Federsen is a respected physician, he is also an
arrogant, egotistical man, bloated with his own importance, who likes
to think himself God to his patients and family. He has been able to
create his family in his image; his children are just as intelligent
and obese as he, but they have no inclination toward medicine.
Federsen precariously controls his family, especially at the "orgies
of gastronomic excess,"11 dinner, during which the doctor rewards his
children's intellectual prowess with more heaps of food.

Federsen dominates each conversation with a play-by-play de-
scription of his most recent brilliant thought or medical technique.
He firmly believes in a personal manifest destiny as well as his own
mystic medical powers, which at times bring him so close to God that
his findings are more precise than laboratory tests (I, vii, p. 110).
Pedersen is so fastidious that he probably washes his hands fifty times a day. Jesse tries to live up to his new father's expectations of him by echoing Pedersen's thoughts and cadences, and by memorizing vast amounts of information for each dreadful dinner quiz. Jesse idolizes his grotesque father, although he is unaware of the doctor's morphine addiction or his possessiveness of patients or his fondness for sadistic pornography, especially "photographs of dismembered bodies, with captions beneath them like jokes" (I, x, p. 171).

Blindly grateful, Jesse is totally unaware of how Pedersen victimizes his family, especially his daughter and wife. Hilda, who is forced to perform for curious academics in amphitheaters, quenches her fears with fistfuls of chocolate bars. She accuses her father of trying to destroy her: "'You want to stuff me inside your mouth, I know you . . . . Father wants to kill me. Eat me!'" (I, viii, p. 140). But the innocent who most needs to escape from Pedersen is his lardy, alcoholic wife. She coerces the confused Jesse to help her escape, telling Jesse just what kind of an ogre Pedersen is, especially the mental abuse he inflicts upon her: months of silence; hypnosis; depriving her of all her clothes; forcing her to shave off all her body hair "and if it wasn't shaved off well enough for him he took his razor and went over" it (I, x, p. 170). Jesse and Mrs. Pedersen spend their day of flight covering when the phone rings and staving off their fears with large doses of food. But by the end of the day, Pedersen retrieves his wife and leaves the medical school-bound Jesse stranded with a thousand dollars and a note: ". . . . I pronounce you dead to me. You have no existence. You are nothing. You have betrayed
the Pedersen family . . . .” (I, xi, p. 185).

Despite his treatment by Dr. Pedersen, Jesse will later borrow similar traits. The next important father-authoritarian figure in Jesse's quest is Dr. Cady. The man is hardly a grotesque, but he does describe the body as a machine, and "there is no machine as perfect as the human body, nothing like it in all creation" (II, i, p. 191). Cady has an international reputation, a Nobel Prize, and enjoys a remunerative career. Jesse also idolizes this gracious doctor to such an extent that he wants "to become that man without debasing himself" (I, iii, p. 228). So Jesse invades the doctor's fortress-like apartment and ingratiates himself with Cady. But because Jesse cannot invade Cady's personality, he does the next best thing and marries Cady's daughter.

Perhaps as strikingly grotesque as Pedersen is Dr. Ferrault, with whom Jesse finishes his residency. Like Pedersen's, Ferrault's physical appearance reflects his spiritual state. Ferrault has a sunken body and his wrinkled face resembles a death mask (II, ix, p. 307). Despite his ability to restore the precious gift of life, Ferrault is barely human; in fact, he is called "a copy of a human being" (II, ix, p. 313). Lacking in bedside manner, he treats all patients and staff callously, barking out orders and ignoring the women who adoringly serve him.

Ferrault views life-saving operations as nothing more than academic exercises. To him, man is no better than an animal. Personality is all an illusion; man has no soul. Like Dr. Jekyll, Ferrault acknowledges "the monster in ourselves lurking beneath the calm exterior" (II,
While he is working with Ferrault, this is the kind of man Jesse wants to be like. Jesse rather fancies the idea of having no personality but only being associated with Ferrault. Jesse is proud if Ferrault compliments him on being "a part of his brain" or of being ahead of him at the same age. Yet at the same time Jesse hopes for a certain intimacy, a certain kinship with the man he so greatly admires; of course, they never become friends.

One of the more sinister figures whom Jesse does not want to emulate is Trick Nonk, who if he is Jesse's alter ego, revels in the chaos, not the order of life. Trick fancies himself an artist, unlike Jesse, who is unable to even comprehend the pattern of a plot (II, iii, p. 226). Although he is a physician, by the end of the novel, Nonk is a drug-addicted avant-garde poet. Trick desperately wants to be Jesse's friend or perhaps his lover and voyeuristically hounds him throughout medical school. One of his favorite haunts is the none-too-savory pathology farm, where he takes Jesse and Helene Cady, jealous of Jesse's involvement with women, Trick talks of becoming a gynecologist: "I would impregnate them all with my fingertips!" (II, ii, p. 210), and also claims to have boiled and eaten a human uterus (II, v, p. 257). Trick is, in all senses of the word, gross and probably quite mad. He appears to be one of Gates's most gratuitous grotesques. Gates does not provide a very complimentary sketch of an artist figure through him.

What kind of man does Wonderland's innocent quester become? the man who wants to forget his past and deny his personality? After passing "through a succession of other characters like a phantom
walking through walls, Jesse becomes a curious mixture of all his father-authoritarian figures. Like his grandfather, Jesse is a cold man, who loves his family but is unable to exhibit his love for them. Instead, his patients and clinic are his life's core. Jesse is able to finance the Vogel Clinic when a figure out of his well-hidden past, his adoptive grandfather, bequeathes him $600,000 for helping Mrs. Pedersen.

Unfortunately, Jesse mostly inherits the personality quirks of the major grotesques in his life, Doctors Pedersen and Perrault. Like both doctors, Jesse is fascinated by his healing abilities, yet he also views the human body as stuff; his wife's miscarriage is no more than the "irrevocable expulsion of blood and pulp" (II, xi, p. 331). Similar to Perrault, Jesse has no time for friends, only associates. He develops Pedersen's fetish for cleanliness and for bizarre newspaper clippings (III, ix, p. 414). In Cady's image of the human body, Jesse has become a perfect, economical machine, devoting himself to his work. Although he is a doctor, Jesse has no time for humanity, especially his family, who should be the people who matter most. Oddly, he tries to raise his daughters according to the Pedersen method (without the food orgies) and they, especially Shelley, think of Jesse as a monster. Although Jesse believes he comprehends the mystery of life, "love is his great puzzle."15

Although Jesse's wife had once been on her way to an outstanding career in chemistry, Jesse, like Dr. Perrault, does not think women are very capable people. Yet like Cady's other male innocents, Jesse is obsessed by a woman other than his wife. He first meets
this illusory woman when she accompanies one of her lovers into the emergency room. The man has tried to castrate himself with a butcher knife. Jesse has seen worse disasters than this—beaten and abused children, a patient trying to throw up his insides, a woman attempting a self-abortion with a "fruit juice glass jammed up toward the womb" (II, viii, p. 296). Yet during the immediate emergency as in all others, Jesse pronounces: "Nobody is going to die tonight if I can help it!" (II, viii, p. 302). If this mysterious woman goes this kind of self-mutilation, what effect will she have on Jesse?

The woman with whom Jesse is in love is a comic book caricature of the evil seductress. Reva Denk appears in many forms from a sophisticated lady in a limousine to a barefoot artist's model. Most of the time, Jesse thinks of her as a barbaric goddess or huntress, and Reva will have nothing to do with him. He is so charmed and controlled by Reva's mystique that Jesse is willing to sacrifice his family and career by marrying Reva. Preparing for his first lovemaking with her, Jesse performs his own ritualistic self-mutilation by repeatedly drawing a rusty razor blade across his flesh. Jesse returns home, his love never consummated, so that Reva's image perpetually haunts him. For once, however, an Oedipian tale is not completely destroyed by his obsession.

Other critics claim that Jesse's daughter, Shelley, is the destructive woman in his life. She is a runaway, whom he tracks across the continent. If Jesse has raised his daughters in any way similar to Pedersen's method, as Shelley's description of her family life suggests, no wonder Shelley runs away. Like Mrs. Pedersen, Shelley feels
crushed by her family and becomes the fleeing innocent. Unfortunately, she takes up with an amoral drug-pusher, who controls her every move. In the third book of *Wonderland*, Jesse is no longer the innocent, instead, he is the tyrant from whom innocents like Shelley flee.

Jesse feels he must rescue his daughter from Noel, the creep she ran away with. All through his life, Jesse is a Faustian figure making pacts with grotesques to advance his career.¹⁷ However, Noel is the truly demonic character in the novel. Even Noel's friends insist that "Noel is evil. Noel does not exist. Noel has no soul of his own!" (III, xi, p. 472). Although it may originally have been beneficial for Shelley to escape her father's influence, Noel is detrimental to both her physical and mental health. Totally in possession of her, Noel commands Shelley's life. He assures her that attractive young women must mortify their beauty, and he decks her out as "the Fatim," naked and decorated with red paint and beads (III, iii, pp. 599-400). Noel encourages Shelley to forget her family and her former self and prostitutes her to cleanse her. By the time Jesse finds his daughter during her quest for an identity, Shelley is no more than a shortened version of her name—a shell. Noel is the greatest devil-figure in the novel because of his denial of what Jesse has been searching for all along—the self.¹⁸

Although the landscape has been relatively inconsequential throughout, the place where Jesse finds Shelley becomes important. He traces her to Yonge Street, Toronto, a receptacle for the disenchanted drug addicts and draft dodgers of the Viet Nam era. In fact, for unclear reasons, Shelley associates her domestic problems with President
Kennedy’s assassination and the aftermath (III, 1). Yonge Street is lined with restaurants and shops crowded with young yet overexperienced people. Although the streets are full, the atmosphere is abnormally subdued. For the most part, the inhabitants are misshapen, malnourished, sexless creatures, who remind Jesse of victims of war, “photographed to illustrate the anonymity of war” (III, xi, p. 470).

Again foregoing his own identity, Jesse dresses himself to conform to the faceless crowd. Jesse is shocked to see his once beautiful and lively daughter, whom he first mistakes for a boy. As promised, Noel has sucked her identity from her, leaving her a jaundiced sack of skin.

Now comes the showdown between the two forces in Shelley’s life, but neither Noel nor Jesse is wholly representative of good or evil. If Noel retains possession, Shelley will surely die of liver failure. Jesse sees this confrontation not as a classical battle between good and evil but as an errand of life-saving mercy. On the other hand, if Jesse gains possession of her, will Shelley be further reduced to a vacuous woman, like her mother and Mrs. Pedersen, forced to live in her father’s shadow? To befuddle Shelley, Noel calls Jesse “the devil himself, the devil! ... He’s here to take her back into bondage” (III, xi, p. 477). But when Jesse offers Noel $500 for Shelley, Noel graciously accepts, even though the same amount is paid for a cadaver at the medical schools. 19

Confused by the whole ordeal, Jesse steers Shelley clear of Noel. Yet Jesse has no idea where his car is or how to leave the city. In a scene reminiscent of the hardback’s introductory inset, Shelley
breaks away from Jesse, running smack into a fence. Now the reader
knows that Shelley is the hysterical, fleeing figure of the inset,
and Jesse is her angered pursuer. The actual wording of the inset
does not appear, only the image. Shelley is running from her father
and the situation and Jesse strikes her because he is angry and
frustrated. Forgetting about medical attention, the weeping Jesse
sets himself and his daughter adrift in the lake. This, of course,
is a non-typical Catesian conclusion because there is no definitive
violence. One Catesian scholar suggests that Jesse drowns Shelley
and then kills himself. This is a possible conclusion since the
last paragraph of the hardcover edition makes no mention of Jesse
or Shelley, only the boat:

He embraced her. He clutched at her thighs, her ema-
ated thighs, her legs. He pressed his face against
her knees weeping.
The boat drifted most of the night. Near dawn it was
picked up by a large handsome cruiser, a Royal Mounted
Police boat, a dazzling sight with its polished wood
and metal and its trim of gold and blue (11, III, xi, p. 512).

However, to confuse the issue of the conclusion even more, the
paperback and subsequent editions conclude quite differently. Instead
of getting paid, Noel runs away in fear. Shelley accuses Jesse of
being evil: "the said you were the devil and I . . . I think you
are the devil . . . come to get me to bring me home . . . ." To
which Jesse replies: "Am I?" (111, III, xi, p. 479).

Trying to decide which is the more appropriate ending may help
the reader draw some conclusions about Wonderland. If it makes any
difference, the second ending is Cates's original and preferred
choice. She regrets the whole confusion: "It's like a bad dream that never came to a completion. It's the first novel I have written that doesn't end in violence ... Therefore there is still a sickish, despairing, confusing atmosphere about it."21 It seems that Oates is deliberately trying to create an ambivalent ending for her novel.

No matter what conclusion one chooses, each is gothic. The hardback ending appears the least likely. First of all, Higdon's theory of murder and suicide seems the least probable. There is no solid evidence that Jesse has killed Shelley and then himself, although he always carries a gun. Jesse would not have spent so much time and effort to find his most beloved daughter and then kill her. Besides, Oates would not spare her readers a violent conclusion to her novel, when she usually provides all of the horrific details. The first ending suggests that Jesse, when faced with personal tragedy, is unable to hide behind his cool efficiency as a doctor. Instead, he crumbles, mourning Shelley's imminent death without bothering to administer to her health. The only indication that Jesse would react so carelessly is that the entire time Shelley is missing, he is unable to take his work seriously. If Jesse expects her to die, perhaps his payment of the cadaver fee is more than symbolic.

In a sense, Jesse has come to a mastery of his personality in the second conclusion. His reply to Shelley's accusation is "'Am I?' Jesse said," not "'Am I?' Jesse asked." In this ending, Jesse retains his professional composure as he is about to regain possession of his daughter. He acknowledges he is a devil of sorts, a composite of all of the grotesques to whom he was a protégé, and he is sure of his
control in personal matters. In contrast to the first ending, Jesse is more aware of his personality.

Both conclusions force Jesse to face his own identity. So if he is a blathering weakling (§1) or a well-oiled machine assembled from other men’s parts (§2), neither personality is wholly desirable. His ambition to be of service to mankind has left him a hollow man, a phantom of a personality. Maybe he did not want to become a rich physician, but his rise to the top of his profession forced him to ingratiate and prostitute himself to his mentors. If Shelley is representative of what Jesse has gained, then Oates is making a sad commentary on the “voyage of a representative American through the symbolic landscape of American culture,” where the victim will inevitably become the victimizer.

Notes for Chapter Three


9 Friedman, p. 108.
10 Elizabeth MacAndrew, The Gothic Tradition in Fiction (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), p. 12 indicates that the gothic villain's appearance corresponds with his spiritual state.
11 Joanne V. Creighton, Joyce Carol Oates (Boston: Twayne-C. C. Hall, 1979), p. 75.
12 Creighton, Oates, p. 77.
13 The pathology is a grotesque display of man's inhumanity to other creatures. The experiments there, which are graphically described, include radiation treatments to sheep, dogs without backs, burning of monkeys, etc.—all for the advancement of life-saving medicine (II, iv, pp. 236-46).
14 Sheppard, p. 89.
15 Sheppard, p. 89.
16 One such critic is Leonard J. Left, "The Center of Violence in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction," Notes on Modern American Literature, 2 (1977), 89.
17 Friedman, p. 106.
18 Friedman, p. 109.
21 According to C. P. Waller, Dreaming America ( Baton Rouge:...
Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), p. 156, the second ending was Oates's original choice. The direct Oates statement is quoted by Patricia S. Box, "Visions and Revisions in Wonderland," *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 9, No. 1 (1979), 5.

22 Friedman, p. 36.
Chapter Four

The Gothic Villain/Villainess

Perhaps Joyce Carol Oates is better known in some circles for her short stories, of which she has published a dozen collections. Her short fictions have appeared in a variety of publications from Cosmopolitan to Prairie Schooner to The Literary Review. Of her collected short stories, some are gothic by virtue of their settings, especially those in By the North Gate (1963) and Upon the Servicing Flood (1966). Other collections’ titles sound more gothic, The Hungry Ghosts (1974) and Crossing the Border (1976), but really have very little to do with the nightmarish side of life. Some of Oates’s more gothic tales, “Demented” and “Sentimental Education,” have appeared in several of her collections.

There are, however, a few of Oates’s collections which are exclusively gothic. One, Night-side (1977), flaunts such titles as “The Dungeon,” “Bloodstains,” and “The Murder.” For the most part, the stories in this collection and others are written as “traditional narratives” while exploring “borderline reality.” For example, “Night-side” is in a style very much like that of Henry James, if not a parody of his style.

As for the other collection, The Prisoned Kiss (1975), Oates claims to have translated these Portuguese tales from the spirit of
another author, Fernandes. These Poe-esque tales, written in a very
bare, seemingly poorly-translated style, include such titles as "The
Brain of Dr. Vicente," "The Enchanted Piano," and "In a Public Place";
the latter is the narrative of a murderer who uses piano wire to do in
his victims in hotel lobbies. Oates explains that "the only way I
would accept these stories was to think of them as a literary adven-
ture, or a cerebral/Gothic commentary on my own writing, or as an
expression of a part of my personality that had been stifled." To
appease Fernandes, Oates arranges to alternate every piece of her work
with one of Fernandes's.

But the stories to be discussed in this chapter are not from any
of the very gothic-sounding collections. Instead, "Where Are You
Going, Where Have You Been?" "Queen of the Night," "Ruth," and
Ochola
have at least one gothic element in common—a sinister figure. This
figure could be a grotesque as is Dr. Federsen or the typical two-
dimensional gothic villain. No matter what label best fits, these
sinister figures are dangerous if not lethal to the innocents they
pursue.

Of course these selected stories are Oatesian gothic because they
contain such elements as the increasing sense of dread and the intrusion
of the unexpected into the normal course of life. These tales share
another element—passion can be destructive. Judging from the fol-
lowing titles, Oates has a rather distinct view of the perverse power
of love: Do With Me What You Will, Marriage and Infidelities. Unholy
Loves, Love and Its Derangements (poetry). All too often in Oates's
closed worlds extreme love turns into vile hate and the intimacy of
sexuality can become brutally violent.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is one of Cates's most
discussed tales, possibly because it is one of her best. Published
in other collections (Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards 1968, The
Best American Short Stories 1967, and The Wheel of Love [1970]), it is
also the title story of a collection subtitled, Stories of Young
America.

The innocent of the story, Connie, is barely innocent. She hates
her sister and is contemptuous of her mother. Connie spends her free
hours daydreaming about boys or cruising at a local shopping center
which has come to represent to Cates all that is pretentiously shallow
about middle class America. When she is home she looks and acts one
way, but when she is away from her family she is dangerously flirts-
tions: "everything about her had two sides to it."5

It is no wonder that Connie is barely an innocent, judging from the
kind of world she lives in. Her favorite hang out is a fly-infested
drive-in restaurant "shaped like a big bottle . . . and on its cap
. . . a revolving figure of a grinning boy holding a hamburger aloft"
(p. 15), which is really no more than a non-alcoholic singles' bar.
Connie spends her secret dates in the alleys necking with the boys who
buy her cokes. Draped by the promise of romantic rock lyrics, Connie
wishes for a knight in shining armor: "someone sweet, gentle, the way
it was in movies and promised in songs" (p. 16).

Connie does not meet a knight in armor but a guy in a gold-painted
jalopy, who makes of her dreams frightening hypocrisies.4 Just as
Connie has two sides, her suitor, Arnold Friend, is not what he appears
to be either, and Connie’s gradual realization of this terrifies her. He is not the sly, handsome teenager she posed for in the drive-in’s lot, but possibly a thirty-year-old man, wearing inexpe...
knows where her parents are and who is at the barbecue with them.

Besides the powers of prophecy, Arnold possesses other traditional devilish traits: he hexes Connie with an "X" (p. 21); he is unable to cross the threshold; cannot say the word "Christ" without stumbling over it; speaks in incantations (p. 30); appears to have cloven feet which do not fit in his boots properly; indicates his part in the death of the old lady down the road (p. 28); and claims he can control fire. If Arnold is not a demon, how else is he able to entice the frightened Connie out of the safety of her home without physical force?

As an intruder, Arnold Friend seeks to tempt and possess Connie sexually. At first, she invites the flirtation, primping as she answers the door. A number of Catholic scholars, one of whom is Catholic, insist that Oates does acknowledge the actual existence of evil in the world. Hence, Connie gets whatever she deserves for trifling with the devil. Not only will she become this demon's property ("My sweet little blue-eyed girl" [p. 31]), but things will never be the same again as he suggests: "The place where you come from ain't there anymore" (p. 29).

But just as evil is ambivalent, so is Friend, and he could be representative of any number of things. As a grotesque, Arnold may be the image of what Connie wants to suppress at home, her sexuality. On the other level, Arnold will provide Connie with what she wants—her initiation into sex, although Friend does not make the experience sound very romantic. At the same time, Friend may also represent Connie's "solitary, haunting fears, especially of men," which many of Oates's women have. By the end of the story, Connie is so paralyzed
with fear that she cannot even force herself to think. So even though Connie may be desirous of male attention, she is by no means prepared to relinquish her sexual innocence.

Just as evil is usually considered universal, so is Connie’s experience—her loss of innocence, sexual or otherwise. Just as easily, Arnold could represent “life rather than the devil—friendly and ominous, glittering and tawdry, courting and malevolent, omniscient and ridiculous.” After all, Friend is forcing Connie to grow up, leave the protection of her family and the familiar, and acknowledge her own sexuality. Most significantly, Arnold is an alien figure, and no matter what he represents, it will be the unknown, which is more dreadful than sexuality, experience, or even death because the unknown is indeterminable. By the end of the tale, Connie is so confused that her own home is no longer recognizable to her, and “horror resides in the transformation of what we know best, the intimate and comfortable details of our lives made suddenly threatening.” Just as terrifying for the reader, Oates does not detail Connie’s fate but lets us speculate.

“Queen of the Night” (1979) is similar to “Where Are You Going” because it also contains a sinister male intruder. Contrary to what the title suggests, this evil figure is not a witch, even though the husband calls his wife “Queen of the Night,” linking her with “Hecate, a goddess of witches and the underworld, a female principle incarnate rich in psychic vibration.” Yet as it turns out, the wife has very little power. Instead, it is her gawky young husband who is the demon.
Claire, the unsuspecting innocent of this tale, wants to take charge of her life after her twenty-six year marriage ends in divorce because of "another woman." Like a statue, she has remained impervious during the divorce proceedings. In fact, Claire had always had the qualities of a goddess because of the classical features which made her look "disturbingly erotic" like "something sculpted. Marble. Alabaster." Just a little bewildered, she begins her new life as a divorcée. Perhaps she feels the need to play the role of her ex-husband's second wife, the temptress, and is very pleased to acquire the first man who is attracted to her.

Through her liaison with Emil, Claire senses a "sudden vitality, an uncanny strength that had lain in trance for many years. The body's life is a matter of power, she saw, and one of the many manifestations of this power is—simply—to recognize it and pay homage to it" (p. 15). And Emil does pay homage to his older wife, trembling at the sight of her and frequently complimenting her physical presence. Claire enjoys the new found powers, especially seductive, she has over Emil; it amuses her to think Emil is afraid of her (p. 16). Of course, as a gigolo and accomplished actor, Claire's new husband allows her to believe that she is in control by performing countless errands for her, letting her choose his wardrobe, demanding love and attention from her, and telling her that all his male friends adore her. To encourage her mystique, Emil attributes occult powers to Claire; reading his thoughts, controlling his dependancy, drawing his near to her (p. 15). And Claire, so desperate for love and companionship, is easily taken in.
Yet as the story progresses and by the end of the tale, it is clear that Hair has controlled Claire all along. Of course most newly divorced middle-aged women would be charmed by a younger admirer, and Hair uses his power to his best advantage. Originally, he had met Claire in Florida and had convinced her to drive him North, supposedly, "though she was paying for his meals and lodging and the gas for the car, he fully intended to repay her within six months" (p. 14). Claire keeps her highly marketable house because of Hair; buys him all that he needs; puts up with his lazy depressions, his refusal to sleep with her, and his noisy, inconsiderate friends; and sets him up in the upper-middle class life style. Yet in the end, though nothing has been explained, Claire submits to Hair's true powers as he insultingly introduces her to his friends who have overrun the house, as the "Queen of the Night."

Perhaps Hair is more than an opportunistic gigolo; for just like Arnold, Oates gives him demonic, yet more subtle traits. His favorite play is Webster's *The White Devil*; his real name e age are indeterminate; when they first met, Claire thinks he is twenty-nine, but when they have been married for a year, Hair celebrates his thirty-fifth birthday. Suspiciously, Hair often disappears, rarely spending an entire night with Claire. What is he doing at this time? Spending time with other night friends? One of his numerous night friends, who keeps showing up in all parts of the country, has red hair like a traditional devil figure. Hair admits to being a freak (p. 16), and like the devil, prefers to view the world as utter chaos (p. 12). As a master of mimic and disguise, Hair is able to withhold revealing his
true power over Claire until the night he leads her to his own of friends. He insists that she "knew" who he is and what he wants from her as she is hypnotically drawn into his complete control (p. 32).

Once again, the demonic figure is a type of grotesque. Neill is hardly handsome; rather, he is a thin, sickly, mystical figure to whom Claire is attracted because he pays attention to her. As Arnold is to Connie, so Neill is representative of Claire's new-found sexuality. She wants to become carelessly involved with a man, but in flirting with the unknown she enters into a groundless marriage. At times, Neill is no more than a child to her, which makes her feel "unashamedly maternal" (p. 14). But the discovery of what Neill is, whether demon or rake, terrifies Claire. She should have suffocated him with a pillow—a violent reaction induced by her sexual passion after Neill rejected her one night—when she had the chance (p. 25). Instead, her fate is unknown. Will Neill and his friends engage an unwilling Claire in some mystic rite? Will she become the symbolic earth mother/sexual partner to them all? or will they merely overrun her house, liquor cabinet and pantry? Whatever Claire has fallen victim to, it will be devastating to this suburban, upper-middle class woman. Her only real mistake is her desire to satisfy her need for companionship and love.

Although Oates's female characters usually appear in the traditional roles of maidens in distress or temptress—seductress, Oates has some interest in the plight of women. Obviously, "Where Are You Going" and "Queen of the Night" sadly demonstrate "valuable insights about the powerlessness of women and the causes of their desperation."
Though not obsessed by their passions, both Connie and Claire expect to find fulfillment in their lives through sexuality. Unfortunately, both become afraid of their choices because their men are threatening, representative of the unknown; there is no escape or turning back. Gates is not ignoring women, but is sadly displaying the few options they have had and the often disastrous results of choosing only sexuality. 

As traditionally gothic as the maiden in distress is the villainess sometimes known as the temptress-seductress. In The Monk by Matthew Gregory Lewis, it is a woman, dressed as a holy brother, who seduces the pious monk and leads him down the path to perdition. After the great age of Gothic, some of the Romantic poets, such as Coleridge in "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel" or Keats in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" repeatedly depicted women as dangerous seductresses. It is, of course, no more complimentary to women to be viewed as temptresses who condivide, seduce, and swallow men, than to be seen as victims of men. Yet traditional literature has always placed the blame on such enigmatic females, ignoring the man's willingness.

In Gates's fiction, the villainess is hardly grotesque, yet she is more apparently destructive to men than the demon figure is to women. Despite the male victim's willingness, he has no ability to resist his obsession for women just as Shax cannot resist Karen, Revera resist Claire, Jules resist Nadine, or Jesse resist Kara. Although these women are essentially passive, even showing a kind of obedience in their roles, they can be quite lethal. One of Gates's short story collections, The Goddess and Other Women, is primarily devoted to
just such women. While one of the tales yet to be discussed, "Ruth," is from this collection, the other story, Croela, has been published separately.

"Ruth" is set in a decayed Mienio landscape which gives the story a mythical yet realistic atmosphere. Although the immediate setting was once thriving, the ramshackle farm is now rotting away and the familial relationships have also eroded away. The seductress who comes to invade this place not only destroys her male victim but also his entire family's means of survival.

Mr. Wresin is a rather unlikely victim, "a big hard-looking man, now beginning to go to fat . . . ; with all his height and muscles, it was more difficult for him than for most men to keep his weight down." But he is frustrated by his disappointing life, his stale marriage, and his four children, who are "burdens to be protected but he did not think of them in themselves" (p. 87). He begrudgingly takes the indigent Ruth into his home only for the summer. Although he usually avoids women, even his wife, Wresin begins to take long walks with Ruth and soon falls in love with her, living "in a world that throbbed with his infatuation for the girl" (p. 100). Of course Wresin does not bother to analyse his love for Ruth, and he has no idea that he is under her spell. He regards her as an innocent whom he has taken advantage of even though she admits that she has been sent away from home because her baby died (p. 89).

Nor does Ruth appear to be the voluptuous villainess. In fact, she is very good at playing the victim. Ruth is a thin, sickly teenager with bruised-looking eyes. As the illegitimate daughter of Mrs.
Wresin’s sister, she has no home to really call her own. Ruth does have some peculiar quirks like her fondness for singing to the cats and her inordinate delight in all vegetation and animals. Like a poltergeist, Ruth disrupts the Wresin household. The young children are shy of this intruding stranger, while the daughter who is Ruth’s age is not only jealous but also afraid of her (p. 34). The Wresin children are truly perceptive innocents, who can recognize evil, although they cannot protect themselves from it. Mrs. Wresin, however, is as dense as her husband. Oh, she realizes something is different about the house once Ruth comes to live with them, but she is unsure as to what it is. Like her husband, she comes to love Ruth unquestioningly. And like a handmaiden, Mrs. Wresin prims and brushes Ruth’s hair in hopes she will attract a boyfriend; ironically, that boyfriend is Mr. Wresin.

Ruth comes to represent more than sexual enticement for Mr. Wresin. She also becomes symbolic as a new beginning in his life. So when Ruth announces her pregnancy by him, Wresin has no qualms about running away with her to start his life anew. Yet unlike other Catesian innocents, Wresin escapes with the evil force he should be trying to flee. Something causes him to panic as they drive away, and Wresin crashes into a tree, killing himself. Ruth still plays the victim, anguisher: “Why do they die—Why do they die? It isn’t my fault—” as though she deserves to be blamed and as though she has been responsible for such destruction before (p. 104).

It might be difficult to view Ruth as an evil force because, injured and pregnant by the end of the story, she seems merely a
victim of circumstance. But what kind of power does Ruth possess to make the indecisive Wrenin leave his family, to make him think of nothing but her, to make him smash the car into a tree while surviving the fatal accident herself? Ruth is a gothic villaness, and once she has killed Wrenin, she will probably lie in wait for his soldier son to return. But no matter what her source of power, evil or merely the fact of her being a desired woman, Ruth no matter how inviting ... at her center is destructive.15

Cybele (1979) is one of Gates' most curious works, perhaps because it is so cynical about the relationship between men and women. It is hard to know whether to call Cybele a short story or a novella. In any case, it is gothic, presenting love and sex as often obscene and violent.

Like "Ruth," Cybele is about the destructive power of women. Like Mr. Wrenin, Edwin Locke is bored, although he lives a perfect life; is relatively handsome and healthy; has a seemingly excellent marriage and two marvelous sons; and maintains a successful and lucrative career. But Edwin wants something more from his boxed-in, detailed suburban life. So even though he is impotent with his wife, he begins a series of affairs in which he becomes more obsessed with each woman, who, in turn, becomes less and less wholesome. And each liaison becomes more physical until, in the end, Edwin is stabbed with a scissors and then burned to death by his lover and her friends.

The first chapter of this tale/novella is narrated by an uniden-
tified woman who claims Edwin as her victim. As a kind of goddess, she describes him as a worshipper who died more abruptly and cruelly than
she had wished. Of course this kind of revealing introduction establishes tread throughout the entire narrative. This female speaker does not emerge again until the final chapter. Diagnosed by Edwin’s humanness, his mortality, she swallows him (p. 194). Who is this speaker supposed to represent? Is she Cybele, as the title suggests, the mother of the gods, who drove her lover to self-castration because he rejected her? Or is the speaker one of the women in Edwin’s life such as his wife or his last lover, Zanche? Or is Edwin the victim of all women who are all representative Cybeles?

Cybele is the story of Edwin’s flight from normal, acceptable sexuality and normal family and home life. Like Mr. Wrenn, Edwin flees to instead of from the force he should be escaping. Obsessed with the women in his life, Edwin tries to adopt their life styles, which become more degenerate as time progresses. Perhaps Edwin’s problem is that he thinks all women need to be rescued and cared for. Not only does he provide solace for Cathleen, whose husband does not understand her, but extravagant gifts for Iris. Later, he rescues Iris from an irate bookseller and also handles all of Zanche’s bills. When his wife no longer needs him, he is offended by her freedom. At first, Edwin does not think of these relationships as casual, but as true love. Hence, he entirely commits himself to each woman and expects the same from each.

Edwin falls madly in love with a series of female stereotypes. The first, Cathleen, who needs to be rescued from her oak of a husband, is a distressed damsel in a tower. In fact, their first tryst occurs in the Tower, the airport hotel. To Edwin, Cathleen is
the ideal woman—beautiful, a wife, and a mother. At first he declines sexual interest in her for a pure love. He wants to marry her, become her soul mate; he has fallen in love for the first time. But after months of sneaking around and Edwin's inability to admit his infidelity to his wife, their affair turns ugly, and Cathleen becomes frustrated, violent, foul-mouthed. Perhaps of all the women with whom he has affairs, the demure Cathleen is the most manipulative, trying to force Edwin to leave his family for her.

Besides loving a maiden in distress, Edwin falls in love with his sexual fantasy, a chunky-breasted and large-hipped woman who is not the least bit shy about sex. Risa, not unlike Jesse's Eva, is a tall woman with a mane of hair. She reminds Edwin of an Amazon, and she is often described in terms of animal imagery. Once again, Edwin claims to have fallen in love for the first time, but it is he who proposes marriage to her. He changes his lifestyle by divorcing his wife and living in a bachelor apartment. He even fights and is badly beaten up by Risa's old boyfriend. As a gold-digger, Risa takes Edwin for all she can to satisfy her exotic, expensive tastes, even convincing Edwin to finance her vacation to Narrakeek with her former boyfriend—the one who knocked out Edwin's teeth.

One of the more grotesque liaisons in Edwin's life is with a woman who is described as "not young, nor is she pretty any longer, despite her clever make-up" (p. 116). They meet in the tawdry Costa del Sol Lounge and after a few pick-up clichés, return for their one-night stand to his even more tacky room with a heart-shaped bed, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and background music of "The Bolero" (p. 134).
Despite the mood, the suggestive vases and phallic candles, incense, and greasy-tasting body oils, this attempted reconciliation-masquerade between Edwin and his wife ends in disaster as she claws and strikes at him.

Edwin's obsession with women leads him to one of his secretaries, a student who is also a topless masseuse, and finally to an earthy artist. In his attempt to find love, Edwin's personal life falls apart. Besides the divorce, his children refuse to see him; his health sufferer; he ingests large doses of alcohol, hashish, cocaine, and handfuls of pills. The more time, money and passion he devotes to each woman, the less they give him in return. The last woman Edwin pledges himself to, Zanthe, does not need protection from anyone. As an earth mother type, she is "flamboyant, crude, short-tempered" (p. 175), and their relationship is entirely physical—the kind of woman Edwin thinks he always wanted. Although Edwin completely finances her life, Zanthe still sleeps with her previous boyfriend, a living legend of an artist called Rek; the easy-going Edwin would like to be an audience to their love-making.

During another lonely night spent at Zanthe's studio, babysitting her child, Edwin begins to tease the little girl. By mistake, Edwin finds out that Chrissie is neither a little girl nor a little boy, but a hermaphrodite. Edwin goes wild, possibly in reaction to drugs, pushes Chrissie down and destroys the studio. Zanthe and her friends arrive, accusing Edwin of molesting Chrissie, and this time it appears that someone must be rescued from Edwin. It is quite possible, though unexplained, that Edwin sexually abused the child; after all, his
moral standards have sunk quite low. This array of welfare-collecting artists does not want Edwin to escape, not because they think he is a child-molester but because they fear he will inform the police about them. In a frenzy of violent activity, Edwin is repeatedly stabbed and then doused with gasoline before they burn his body. The next morning, all that remains of Edwin is his charred body, which some kids mistake for a badly burned dog. In a mythic sense, Edwin has revealed Cybele in her original form—hermaphrodite—when he sees Chrissie naked. And Cybele—Chrissie allows her priests, in this case her mother’s companions, to destroy her intruder.

Why is the concluding violence of this Oates novella so repulsive? Even more curiously, why does Oates make her artist figures so vindictively violent? The artists in Zanone’s building gleefully murder Edwin with shouts of “Fascist swine!” or “Contemptible fascist exploiter!” (p. 201), although he has been supporting most of them in one way or another. The definitive violence in Cybele has something to do with a class struggle. But as an artist herself, Oates has been depicting artist figures as enigmatic, often cruel, and like Flail, demonic. Is she issuing a warning or a threat about artists?

Even worse, Oates seems to be portraying women as terribly evil, powerful forces. Each of Edwin’s mistresses, who increasingly care nothing about him, is increasingly lethal to him. The mythical Cybele, after all, destroyed men who did not please her. So the speaker in the first and the last chapter is not Zanone or the hermaphrodite Chrissie or any woman in particular, but the power women in general can have
over men. The women, who are Cybele in this tale, are even aided by their priests; in fact, all the women Edwin falls in love with are accompanied by an omniscient, gnome-like man. To his first rendezvous with Cynthia, Edwin is driven by a "small, almost elfin" workman (p. 30), while an "elfin, leering... little man with his pot belly carried high" tries to introduce Edwin to Rima (p. 62). The cashier at the "Kissel Tower Body Hub" is gnomish as is the expensive, red-haired love therapist Edwin and his wife hire. This recurrent pandezer suggests that all of Edwin's women are indeed linked to the same elfin creature. Is this little man a familiar? an omen of evil? or a demon in league with Cybele? Although one critic claims that Oates never portrays sexual relationships as evil, it seems that Edwin's later affairs are. Edwin's mistake is not his obsession with women, but engaging in relationships which are merely sexual. Although Oates has been accused of offering no moral standpoint, she is not condemning women or love, but sex for its own sake.

In these four tales, Oates is not displaying the dangers of succumbing to the evil temptations offered by a villain or villaininess, but the dangers of succumbing to "the ubiquitous, gratuitous potential in all human relations"—pure sexual passion. Women are different from men in Oates's world because unlike the female innocents, the male innocents are obsessed by what their villainesses can offer. All of the innocents, Connie, Claire, Wrasin, and Edwin make the same mistake of misinterpreting sexual fulfillment for love. Because the conclusions of "Where Are You Going" and "Queen of the Night" leave more to the reader's imagination, they are more suspensefully gothic.
in the sense that they allow the reader to imagine a more horrible
fate than even Cates can describe.

Notes for Chapter Four


6 Mary Kathryn Grant, The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Cates (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1978), p. 21 writes: "Evil does exist in Cates's fictive world, personal evil and guilt, malevolent forces in the world . . ."; and Rose Marie Burwell, "Joyce Carol Cates and an Old Master," Critique, 15 (1975), p. 37 writes: "But her realism is of a metaphysical brand that recognises among first principles that existence of real evil—not the sentimentalised social evils of Steinbeck and Dreiser—but the ubiquitous, gratuitous, evil potential in all human relations."


8 Friedman, p. 12.


11 "Queen of the Night" (1979) rpt. in *A Sentimental Education* (New York: B. F. Dutton), p. 8. Hereafter the page references are cited in the text.


13 Goodman, p. 21.


16 *Cybele* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1979), p. 11. Hereafter page references are cited in the text.

17 According to *Cromwell's Handbook of Classical Mythology*, ed. Edward Trip (New York: D. Appleton, 1970), pp. 179-180, Cybele is identified as the mother of the gods of Olympus. Born as a hermaphroditic, she sprang from Zeus' ejaculation on Mount Dindymus. Cybele's male genitals were cut off. One of her loves, Attis, rejected her, so she drove him to self-castration. Cybele is attended by castrated priests.

18 Joanne V. Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* (Boston: Twayne-G. K. Hall, 1979), p. 54 writes: "Oates, like Faulkner, Lawrence, and Nietzsche, is unable to characterize sexual love as evil."


20 See note 6, Burwell.
Chapter Five

The Intentional Gothic,

Bellefleur

Cates is at her gothic best in Bellefleur (1980), for not only is she consciously aiming toward a traditionally gothic novel, but also demonstrating her own gothic concept. Bellefleur might be Cates’s response to the critics’ accusations labeling her a gothic writer, although she claims: "I’ve never been able to respond very fully to criticism, frankly, because I’ve usually been absorbed in another work by the time the criticism is available to me." But is Bellefleur hard-core gothic because Cates really wants to prove she is very good at writing what she has been accused of writing all along? Or is the novel a jumbled parody of all that is gothic, designed to demonstrate the absurdity of the genre?

Although the above questions will be pursued later, whatever the answer, Bellefleur is Cates’s best gothic novel to date because of the virtuosity with which she handles her material. In a sense, Bellefleur is not a novel at all, but a collection of tales and short stories spun together by Cates’s ingenuity through seven interchanging generations of Bellefleurs. Oh, sometimes there is a gap in the web, weighted down by Jedediah’s (1782–1882) religious rumblings, but Cates has always excelled at writing short pieces. Cates borrows from
familiar legends and fairy tales such as Rip Van Winkle, The Pied Piper, Dracula, and even more. Yet she also creates her own tale exemplified by the gothic titles of some of her chapters: "Bloody Run," "The Insecure Butcher," and "The Demon."

As if Gates has finally realized that Alien County is her most dearly drawn locales, Bellefleur is set in this kind of landscape. Although Alien is not mentioned, the Chautaugua and other Alien place-names are, and the area which Bellefleur manor overlooks is lushly mythic, being very similar in terrain to Alien County. Of course the novel is not entirely fantastical because Gates takes care to mention realistic, historical events such as Lincoln's death. But by using an Alienic setting again, Gates removes the action, which allows the reader to almost believe that such fantastic things do happen in distant parts. In fact, Gates so isolates the Bellefleurs in the beginning of the novel that the reader cannot be sure in what era the main action is set until the twenty-fourth page, where cars and pickup trucks are mentioned.

The action is further removed because most of it takes place in and on the grounds of Bellefleur manor. The fortress is not the city as in them, but an honest-to-goodness castle. Of course it is not a newly-built castle, but a sixty-four room monstrosity of a house in the state of disrepair—a castle with its own history and legends, haunted by mistakes and bad luck and the spirits to whom these misfortunes have happened. The manor is convenient to house most if not all of the Bellefleurs in one place so that the author and reader can easily keep track of them; it also provides for a
convenient finale.

The cast of characters is rather large and some are not the least bit memorable or outstanding. But with Belleflur, Oates seems to have accomplished her "laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book," well, if not the whole world, all of America.

For the Bellefleurs are definitely American, carving their empire out of the wilderness, proudly sticking together, feuding with and exploiting their neighbors. The Bellefleurs are also housed together because they need protection from their irritated neighbors; the novel, among other things, is the story of the Bellefleurs against the world. So the generations of children grow up together, watching the legends told to entertain and frighten them become reality as when the Noir Vulture whisks a baby cousin away. In Belleflur, life is so unpredictable that the possibility of its turning suddenly horrific is a daily but expected threat.

In this novel, Oates is so consciously gothic that she overburdens the reader with details. She cannot write about one haunting experience but must devote an entire chapter to the history of haunted items in the Belleflur household (III, ii). There are so many Bellefleurs that Oates provides a family tree, thank goodness. Of course all good gothic novels must begin on a dark and stormy night and Belleflur does. This stormy night, when Oates takes the opportunity to introduce the cast of characters, is the same storm-wracked night that Mahaleal, the cat, is rescued and portends the future events of the modern Bellefleurs.

Like most gothic tales such as The Castle of Otranto or "The Fall
of the House of Usher," there is a curse on the reigning family.

However, there are as many theories about the nature of the curse as there are Bellefleurs. The curse could be something as mysterious as the reason behind the absurd deaths the family suffers, or the deep dark moods the men fall into and the women must endure. Or maybe the curse has something to do with the family's deliberate apathy toward religion. Or perhaps the curse is merely being born into the Bellefleur family, or as is often true in Oates's world, the Bellefleur couples just can't love right. Most likely, the curse haunting the family is visited upon us all—the curse of being human.⁴

By no means is the plot of Bellefleur easy to summarize, especially because of the innumerable tales, both traditional and derived, that Oates includes. Often these tales are updated versions of legends. For example, Leah's manservant, a troll or perhaps a dwarf, is found in the mountains playing nine pins with his other little friends (Zip Van Winkle), and one of the services he performs for the Bellefleurs is to magically exterminate all of the rodents in the castle (The Pied Piper). Many of the legends are focused on animals such as Leah Pym's spider, Love, which she uses to ward off suitors, or the cannibal foxes which devour one another and lead to the further ruin of the Bellefleur fortune (V, xv, pp. 637–30). Perhaps Oates is borrowing from myths and Indian legends when she depicts humans turning into bears or hounds. Although Oates is acclaimed as a realist,⁵ this is some of her best fantastical fiction.

Quite often, Oates incorporates previously published material within her novels; that is why one chapter of Wonderland is written
from Hilda Pedersen's point of view. In Bellefleur, five such chapters have been published elsewhere, but one well-executed self-contained tale, "The Bloodstone," has not. This chapter (IV, vii) is Gates's rendition of the vampire legend or Dracula myth. Although the word vampire is never mentioned, it is clear that Aunt Veronica is one, as well as her former suitor. The Count (who else?) who courts Veronica at night and picks her up in a hearse-like car that gives off "an odor not unlike that of a stagnant pond, or a tomb" (IV, iii, p. 427), vanishes, but not before he has presented a heart-sized bloodstone to her. Veronica is not just any jilted lover because she rather enjoys his more striking appearances in her erotic dreams about him. Although Veronica is estimated to be about seventy, she appears no older than forty, maintains a healthy, flushed complexion, and has a minute appetite. Veronica has become a vampire, which explains why she never appears before sundown. But no one notices her eccentric behavior or even bothers to guess her age; nor does Gates bother to explain how the old lady feeds upon blood. Gates's version of the Dracula legend is not treated horrifically but humorously, almost flipantly. So when the Count is asked about his background, just what kind of blood is in his veins, he cannot account for it all (pp. 457-58).

Gates tries to be as traditionally gothic as possible, running the gamut from the supernatural horror story (e.g. "The Room of Contamination") to science fiction (an attempt to revive John Brown's corpse with a galvanic battery [V, i, p. 527]). Unlike her other gothic novels, this one includes supernatural and semi-natural events not
because Gates is trying to convince the reader that such occurrences are realistic, but that these kinds of things happen to the Bellefleurs. Spirits haunt the manor's closets, bathtubs, mirrors, and drawers. A whole suite must be closed off because it is not merely haunted but also contaminated. Germaine Bellefleur is born with the lower body characteristics of a male infant, which are quickly cut off with no apparent damage to the baby girl. A whirlwind coming out of nowhere helps Gideon Bellefleur win a profitable horse race against his best friend, but his friend is thrown and dies. Most of these supernatural events are not explained away or rationalized, but as one Bellefleur patriarch states: "If we stopped believing in them [haunted things] . . . why, then, they would be powerless!" [Gates's italics] (III, ii, p. 594).

Unlike the grotesques in the other novels, whom Gates is trying to convincingly portray as realistic yet horrible men, the grotesques in Bellefleur are hardly meant to be realistic. These characters are grotesques not only because of their appearances but because of their alienating personalities. Nightshade, the troll, for example, fits the description of a comedic grotesque—unnaturally short, hunchbacked, scarred. Yet it is the beautiful Leah who approves of him, although the rest of the clan finds his repulsive. Jean-Pierre II, also known as the "Ninestail Butcher," is a black comedic figure, for soon after his parson for a mass murder, he slashes the throats of twenty-some fruit pickers. Another grotesque, Jedediah, who thinks all men are demons and waits for God to reveal himself, is a self-alienated hermit. Bromwell, one of Leah's children, is also a kind of grotesque, not
only because he perpetually looks like a ten-year-old but because of his thirsting scientific mind, which is always testing, measuring, and examining things. Although Bromwell's carefully-prepared predictions are usually correct, the Bellefleurs pay little attention to a probing mind that is not ruled by emotion.

Yet another gothic technique that Cates borrows is the mirror. In early gothic tales, a mirror showed the villains' truly evil inner selves. Cates acknowledges that use but also borrows the other-world-through-the-looking-glass approach that Lewis Carroll plays with in Through the Looking Glass. One of the reasons The Contaminated Room is defiled is that a Bellefleur son has seemingly disappeared through the mirror there. In Cates's other novels, women usually admire not only their beauty but their strengths in the mirror, and Leah is no different. In her own boudoir's mirror, Leah sees a beautiful, confident, ambitious woman, but when she catches a glimpse of herself in a public mirror, Leah, like the gothic villains, sees her true self reflected—a middle-aged, quarrelsome shrew.

Just why does Cates devote so much of Bellefleur to the fantastically gothic? Most likely, she is showing off and assuring her readers and critics that she can write such a good parody of gothic that it does not appear to be a parody at all. Yet the ghost tales and mysterious legends are not nearly as frightening as the "real-world atrocities," such as the bloody midnight massacre that almost destroys the Bellefleur line (V, v). One of the most horrifying items in the Bellefleur history is a photograph of a burning Negro surrounded by a group of bored lynchers. This photograph frightens the children
because such a shameful event was allowed to occur and to be preserved (IV, x, pp. 495-96). Perhaps it reminds the Bellefleur children of how they revenged Yolande's treatment by the boon boy (II, xiv). After stoning him, they drive the boy into an old barn and burn it down. Oates once again demonstrates that man's inhumane brutality against man is the more terrifying.

As in other Oatesian gothic novels, fleeing innocents abound, but are they all trying to escape certain oppressive Bellefleurs or the Bellefleur influence? Does Samuel vanish into the Turquoise Room's mirror only to get away from his demanding father? Garnet Recht's escape is to attempt suicide, but does she do so only because Gideon no longer loves her? Leah's twins, Christabel and Bromwell, both run away from home. After being forced into a marriage of convenience, twelve-year-old Christabel runs away from her husband with her former tutor. Bromwell, who is sent to boarding school, soon flees to study advanced astronomy, but burning all traces of his Bellefleur ties. None of these innocents ever return to Bellefleur manor because, like other Oatesian innocents, they want to escape their personal and family histories.

Purposefully, Oates tries to confuse the reader as to what the major story line is, if there is one. One of the main interests is Germaine, who is the very first Bellefleur mentioned in the text and who seems to be the focal point for the novel: "it was many years ago in that dark, chaotic, unfathomable pool of time before Germaine's birth . . . ." (I, i, p. 21). The newest legitimate Bellefleur baby is Germaine, whose mother, Leah, thinks that the little girl can
predict and control the future. Or is the rebuilding of the original Bellefleur empire the primary focal point of the novel? After all, once Germaine is born, the family begins to reacquire its vast holdings and reassert its reputation. Or is the main theme the all-consuming, destructive love between Leah and Gideon? Noticeably, all of these issues are densely related.

Germaine is the baby born to Leah and Gideon after Leah thinks she is cursed by not being able to bear any more children. Germaine is a very gothic child who possesses certain powers, including the power of prediction. While Leah is pregnant with her, the mother is strangely lethargic, given to devouring raw beefsteaks and massive quantities of liqueur. Germaine, born after a ten-month pregnancy, is a hermaphrodite, but her male parts are hurriedly hacked away. Germaine has fathomless green eyes with which she is able to intimidate the staunchest of patriarchs. Even Bronwell is duly impressed with his baby sister's intellectual capabilities, but only Leah attributes the restoration of the original Bellefleur empire to her. Leah imagines that Germaine commands:

The family must regain all the land they had lost since the time of Jean-Florent Bellefleur. Not only must they regain all the land—a considerable empire—but they must labor to prove the inferiority of Jean-Florent Bellefleur II as well (Gates's Italiy) (II, v, p. 189).

And for the rest of her life Leah tries to carry out Germaine's wish through the powers she believe Germaine controls.

Ironically, no one heeds Germaine when she actually does predict tragic events. Every time an accident is about to befall a
Bellefleur, Germaine is restless, sometimes throwing a temper tantrum or acting extremely nervous. Germaine becomes the chief source of dread because whenever she behaves erratically, the reader expects a horrific occurrence such as fire, flood, or the infant Cassania’s kidnapping by the Noir Vulture. Because everyone else ignores Germaine’s predictive powers, she too disregards her own nightmares on the eve of her parents’ deaths. Unlike Oates’s other novels, the violent happenings and tragedies rarely come as a surprise in Bellefleur. The author provides clues in the beginning of the chapter or through Germaine so the reader knows well in advance, for example, that Yolande will run away from home never to return or that Gideon’s brother will be brutally assassinated. It is unusual that the proclaimed mistress of panic would pre-inform her readers of each chaotic event, but perhaps Oates is parodying the predictability of such traditional devices as omens and foreshadowings.

By once again portraying the potentially destructive power of love, Oates has created a serious novel in one respect. The relationship between Leah and Gideon, Germaine’s parents, is a passion “too ravenous to be contained by their mere mortal bodies” (I, ii, p.2). Gideon had tried not to become romantically involved with his cousin, but he is “helpless in the face of his love for her, yet this emotion seemed to encompass and swallow up even love” (I, ix, p. 116). Leah’s and Gideon’s marriage brings up one gothic motif which Oates has only suggested before—incest. As indicated in “The Fall of the House of usher,” close ties between brother and sister, for example, may on the surface bring the family together, but at the same time dissolve
familial bonds and, in the end, destroy the family. Although there is no brother-sister incest in Bellefleur, Leah Pym and Gideon Bellefleur are first cousins who marry. Often the partners of an incestuous couple are attracted to one another because they are mirror images of each other, and Gideon and Leah are no exceptions. They are both strikingly good-looking, willful, selfish, and subject to fits of lethargic depression. And their love for each other, which can be described as none other than self-love, leads to the obliteration of the Bellefleurs.

Gideon is entirely devoted to his beautiful wife, but during her uncomfortable pregnancy with Germaine, their relationship begins to disintegrate. All of the males from the Bellefleur children to the great-grandfathers are more than willing to please Leah, and she is "Laura" to Vernon, the rest of the family. She controls whatever she wants, whether it be the arrangement of the furniture, the servants, her own tears, and most men. It is Leah who persuades the family to regain its former holdings, who connives for large tracts of land and factories, and who finagles the pardon for Jean-Pierre II, sentenced to life plus 990 years. In her garden office, like a vegetation goddess, Leah retrieves the mystical powers she believes Germaine transfers to her.

Unlike other Gatesian heroines, Leah is never the least bit submissive, and once she and Gideon are estranged, he could not quite determine how a man might deal with a woman whom he could not make love to, and consequently disarm; for it seemed to him that a woman, even a relatively plain, unassertive woman, had all the advantage . . . all the power. He could not have said what this power was, where it resides, how precisely it might touch a man, but he knew its sinister strength (I, ix, pp. 115–16).
Perhaps Leah's strength is sinister. For example, it seems almost purposeful that she leaves Gideon's illegitimate baby unattended so that the Noir Vultur can carry it away. Her desire to restore the family empire is maniacal; after all, she is only half a Bellefleur. She does whatever her self-appointed task requires, even bedding down with the grotesque, hypocritical Tirpits. Leah becomes so engrossed with making financial connections and carrying off her kinwomen that she forgets that her own children, Christabel and Bromwell, are twins (III, ix, p, 356). But Leah rarely forgets Germaine, who is her ammunition against Gideon. Trying to make the girl hate her father, Leah tells Germaine her father does not love her, and forces the little girl to choose between her parents (V, x). Germaine becomes so frequently a pawn between her parents that, like the other innocents, she longs to run away (IV, i, pp, 411-12).

Once their marriage falters, Gideon becomes a womanizer, trying to fill the gap left by Leah. What woman would not want to become the mistress of the wealthy, reckless, and passionate Gideon Bellefleur? Like many other Catanian males, Gideon is obsessed by women, yet he claims to love each of them deeply. His last mistress, "Mrs. Rachc," is a curious figure in Gideon's life. Although he never knows this rather masculine-looking woman's first name, she takes his last suicidal plane ride with him. Gideon may be the Bellefleur "Angel of Death,"

but "Mrs. Rachc" is a mysterious, demonic influence on him. Even after his disfiguring automobile accident, Gideon attracts women, except the one he wants—Leah—the "only woman in the land who could never be brought to feel desire, let alone love, for him" (V,
vii, p. 574).

Unlike the majority of the Bellefleurs, Gideon does not share Leah's enthusiasm for restoring the Bellefleurs' holdings. In fact, he resents his wife's involvement because her participation in the family business has taken her away from him and made her just another greedy Bellefleur. Gideon is a fleeing innocent who wants to escape his personal history. Even before his accident, which instills in him "a certain revulsion for the earth itself" (V, vii, p. 576), Gideon loathes his family's pomposity. During large parties and family reunions, he often threatens to disappear, and once, after smudging out a dropped candle, he mutters: "'should have let everything go up in flames . . .'" (III, x, p. 366). Unwilling to flee his past history, Gideon obliterates it instead, by planning a spectacular suicide massacre.

The Fall of the House of Bellefleur finally occurs when Gideon plunges his airplane, which is equipped with explosives, into the Bellefleur manor. Despite the restoration attempts, the final destruction of the Bellefleurs had been long in coming. Because many Bellefleurs and business associates had been called together to discuss a recent setback in the renewal plans, Gideon is responsible for many deaths, as well as his own and his mistress'. The crash and the following conflagration are so vivid that the distant witnesses to "the unbearable screams of the dying" and "the hideous blackly-sweet stench of burning flesh" are sure "the end of the world had come" (V, xxi, p. 674). The end of the Bellefleur world, a world of greed and exploitation, has come. Driven by his unfulfilled passion for
Leah and contempt for his family, Gideon destroys an empire. There are, however, surviving Bellefleurs, the various escaped innocents who have disclaimed their name, and, of course, Germaine, who had been entrusted to the care of her great-grandparents by Gideon.

Bellefleur is a well-stocked gothic parody as well as a serious novel. Among other reasons, the novel is serious because it explores Oates's popular theme of the destructive forces of love. Chock-full of gothic trappings, Bellefleur never relents from Oates's exploitation of the genre. Oates is not trying to write a realistic novel like them or Wonderland. As early as the "Author's Note," Oates indicates:

This is a work of the imagination, and must obey, with both humility and audacity, imagination's laws . . . the implausible is granted an authority and honored with a complexity usually reserved for realistic fiction . . . Bellefleur is a region, a state of the soul, and it does exist; and there, sacrosanct, its laws are utterly logical.

Unlike her other gothic novels, Bellefleur contains humor, especially when Oates is calling attention to her obvious gothic devices. Still playing with the reader until the very end, Oates's last narrative utterance is: "I don't know what to believe" (V, xxiii, p. 686).

Nor do we know what to believe, or what is real after reading the novel. But with Bellefleur, Oates can no longer be considered merely an anachronistic realist; she claims a place among the ranks of fabulists.
Notes for Chapter Five


8 Gardner, p. 1.

9 Incest has been indicated between Spar and Karen (with Shuddering Fall), between Clare’s friend, Rosalie, and Rosalie’s father (A Garden of Earthly Delights), and between Mr. Wason and Ruth ("Ruth").


11 Gardner, p. 21.
Conclusion

Judging from the works examined here, gothic is not just a convenient term with which to characterize Gates's fiction, but a very appropriate term. Sometimes blatantly yet sometimes unconsciously, Gates borrows certain gothic trappings and motifs to interpret a world which seems much a term. But in Gates's sly and urban settings, one can find fleeing innocents, lethal grotesques, demonic invaders, or half-creased hermits. Thus the critic who points out Gates's gothicism is not necessarily trying to be insulting, but is, perhaps, perceptive. As a twentieth-century author, Gates's gothic fiction makes her "an anachronism: the last of the nineteenth century Gothic novelists, the fourth Brontë sister," but as Gates indicates, perhaps the very act of writing fiction is an "anachronistic gesture."

Besides claiming that Gates has written too much too quickly to be properly analysed, many academics ignore Gates for being a popular author. One of the reasons for her popularity is her ability to evoke from her reader the same response as the original gothic writers tried to evoke—dread. Gates is somewhat better at sustaining suspense in her short stories because so often in her novels she is forced to layer horrific events upon one another, and the effect is so long in coming that the power of the effect is lost. For example, what makes "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" such a solid gothic tale is that the tension between Friend and Connie is continually built up but
never released because the demonic figure's plans are never revealed. Admittedly, Cates at times ends up evoking only revulsion through graphic violence, writing "the novel of terror" rather than "the novel of suspense." By vividly depicting her characters' grisly nightmarish lives, the fiction becomes the reader's nightmares as well. And although it is often difficult to sympathise with Cates's often two-dimensional characters, the density of action can leave the reader exhausted.

If some of Cates's fiction included in this study is not perceived as gothic, then difficulties in interpretation could develop. Without considering Maureen Wendall or Jesse Vogel as victimised innocents, their lives would only be stylised melodrama. Cates's gothic characters are often flat characters, who in themselves are not very interesting after a while because they are gothic stereotypes —tortured innocents, maidens in distress, seductive temptresses, self-seeking villains, and grotesques. Because the characters are no more than types, it is almost impossible to justify their motivation. In Cates's particular brand of gothic, these stock characters are not so predictable, but exchange roles, and the victim easily becomes the victimiser.

Although Cates may adhere to some conventions of traditional gothic, she is by no means limited to them. For instance, instead of tangling with the supernatural, the most supernatural force her characters confront is fate. One of her major themes is that of the fleeing innocent, who is often escaping no more than the community of his family. Yet another gothic theme is the invited yet obsessive,
destructive powers of human relationships, usually love.

Oates's career as a gothic writer has not remained constant. In the early sixties, Oates created legend-like Eden County where terror-filled events such as blazing car crashes occurred. But the remote fictional setting and the stereotypical characters distance the readers, whom Oates is trying not to offend. Concerned with presenting herself as a realistic writer, Oates transferred her concerns to the social strife of the volatile city. Despite the very recognizable setting and events, Oates's fiction is still gothic, "incredible because she unflinchingly describes American reality, a reality that is stranger than fiction." But in her more recent works, Oates is not concerned with grinding realism, but with achieving a precise blend of the fabulous and the realistic for her gothic. At present, Belieffleur is her best gothic novel as a fabulist-realist because Angel of Death (1981), though myth-based, lacks Oates's fanciful abilities.

Though often considered excessive, violence, although not necessarily gothic, prevails in Oates's fiction. Besides establishing suspense throughout a work, Oates is a master of suggesting the "terror that so often lies under the surface of normal things;" the terrible that can suddenly burst through what appears safe. To Oates, the world is a very gothic place, not at all civilized, for at any moment a perfectly normal life can be torn apart by tragedy, and the stranger one so trustingly encourages is a sinister intruder. Oates demonstrates that no matter how hard one tries, a person cannot flee from his past; if there is evil in the world, it is within; and the worst truth is that the personal self cannot be escaped.
Notes for Conclusion


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