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AUTHOR Mesinger, Bonnie
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ABSTRACT

The "indeterminate" quality of Oates' writing is an asset to the oral interpreter. It demands reader participation and allows the text to become real. The imagery of violence, however, presents special problems. Upon encountering violence in the writing, the reader may experience what Leon Festinger terms "cognitive dissonance." Festinger describes this situation as the result of a person's encounter with information that contradicts his experience or that he wants to avoid, creating a psychological imbalance. According to C. William Colburn, a persuasive message should offer some recommendatio.. which, if accepted, will restore cognitive equilibrium. In much of her literature, Oates offers such recommendations or at least a moral resolution of the material. The indeterminate quality of this resolution, however, demands sensitivity and imagination on the part of the reader. (LL)

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Indeterminacy and Dissonance: An Approach to Violence in the Writings of Joyce Carol Oates

by

Bonnie Mesinger
Wayne State University

> Is that blood on the floor? Blood splotches on the wall, the bathroom . . .? . . . there in the tub. Her body. Heavy, collapsed, the breasts bluish-white and collapsed, her body a strange luminous color, all its energy gone and yet still alive. . . . Smears, streaks of blood. The knife on the floor. Oh, the ugliness of blood, its smell! The ugliness of a face that has no consciousness! I begin to scream. I scream at her to wake up. I am still screaming.1

The imagery of violence at once compels and repels. It fills a hunger for passion and action, yet it disgusts and revolts our moral sense and decency. Current American writers have struggled with the question of "how to bring order to the violent extremity and complexity of American life without mitigating that extremity."[2] Their literature, therefore, reflects their feelings concerning that violent extremity. We, as silent readers and oral interpreters, must wrestle with the same question, and with some of the same feelings.

Joyce Carol Oates, her fragile appearance not withstanding, exemplifies what we may call the "violent trend" in current American fiction. She confesses that in the writing of Wonderland, a gruesome, almost "gothic" tale which commences with the mass slaughter of an entire family, she was able to dramatize the situation. However, "it was very painful

to write . . . I couldn't resolve the moral questions it raised."[3] An earlier novel, With Shuddering Fall, also depicts violence and brutal actions. This depiction drove James McConkey, a reviewer for Epoch, to write that "as a reader and simply as a person, I have a dislike, a real animosity toward fiction which presents gratuitous acts of sexuality and violence and disorder; it seems so thin, so Erskine Caldwellish, so bloodless whatever the blood spilled, to have inadequately-motivated, shadowy human beings tear into each other."[4] Many of us may agree with his opinion. However, his expression bears the seed for those of us who seek a rationale or an approach toward a valid interpretation of Oates' work and that of other writers who are concerned with the social and moral dilemmas of our time.

Oates' characters are indeed "shadowy." They never come to grips with themselves; they act from vaguely felt desires. Her people are humble and ordinary. The violence which erupts from their lives "seems to happen in the random and insignificant way of real life."[5] Karen and Shar from With Shuddering Fall exemplify the idea that Oates' characters "blot things out that they can't deal with."[6]

> Shar had never been able to penetrate through the fine invisible barrier that separated him from other people, from the world, from reality. . . . He would never penetrate through that film--he would never escape himself. On the other side of his limit there was nothing except violence, mutilation, death; but there was not communion.7

> Karen felt that, deep inside, secretly inside her, she was able to think clearly and sanely. . . . Perhaps she had even understood the price of forcing herself up from sleep . . . Perhaps she had understood, without really being able to know. . . .8

The narrator is explicit in the depiction of Shar's inability to understand, to deal with himself and those around him. The technique of des-

cribing Karen is more ironic. The feeling that Karen can understand is deep and secret within her. "Perhaps" she understood. "They do not understand . . . that they have been destroyed."[9]

This type of character exhibits that quality which Wolfgang Iser has termed "indeterminacy," which results from an author's predisposition to leave gaps in his text. What McConkey has termed "shadowy" human beings may ignite the reader's imagination. The irony of characters who at best only think that they know, but who do not know, presents an enigma to the reader. He may begin to distrust Oates' narrators who suggest that characters cannot think very clearly, for the characters themselves act with force, decision, and violence. The reader must work to evaluate the fluctuating levels of understanding. His natural propensity to be curious about the unexplained, the confusing, the misleading "represents the most important link between text and reader. It is the switch that activates the reader in using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text."[10]

Oates, at her best, gives the reader material that demands participation. Not only character, but plot and theme as well present "indeterminate" qualities. "Matter and Energy," a short story from The Wheel of Love, is presented as a series of flashbacks from a young woman's childhood, interspersed with the immediate present, until the two time-periods become one. The consistency of the present tense suggests that the woman embodies all times, that in her being all events are present and immediate. The past has not become blurred in memory, but is a constant companion. The fear the young woman feels is one of intense identification with her mother. Will she, like her mother at the age of thirty-four, become sick and insane? The progression of time, from 1956 to 1969, increases this

tension. If we trust the young woman and accept and participate in her fears, we can imagine her erupting, like her mother, breaking free from the control of thought that merges past and present.

The story's end is not conclusive. However it highlights Oates' theme, which again is indeterminate.

> I am thinking of the trail of blood stains. . . . Vince bends to pick a weed. It has little green buds where flowers would have been. The buds are very small, not even green; they are white. They are bloodless, tiny, tight, turned in upon themselves as if in an agony of dreaming. Vince makes a bow, he presents me with the "flower." "Do you love me a little?" he says as a joke. I take the flower from him. It is not a flower, and it will never be a flower now. "Yes. I think so," I tell him. He seems satisfied.11

The previous act of violence was not "gratuitous;" it explains the young woman's inability to love truly. The bud, plucked before it can become a flower, is a symbol for Oates' characters, who turn "in upon themselves as if in an agony of dreaming." If we as readers can do likewise, can we not come to some understanding of the nature of violence, the impotence from which it springs, and the impotence which it generates? Oates' choice of characters, plots, and theme pulls us into a violent world so that our apprehension of the world of action is enriched and renewed.

The "indeterminate" quality of Oates' writing (at her best, for she is quite prone to over-writing as well) is an asset to the oral interpreter. It demands reader participation and thus allows the text to become "real." As Iser suggests, "we generally tend to regard things that we have made ourselves as being real."[12]

The imagery of violence, however, presents special problems. What does the reader/listener do when confronted with "white glass mixed with

blood," "a lamp shade splattered with blood," "her throat and the upper part of her chest blasted red, raw, the bone somehow showing through the mess of bleeding flesh?"[13] Does he want to participate? Does he, or can he, pile image upon image until his imagination gleams with shining red, until he, like Jesse from Wonderland, can smell the sweet odor, rising "to him in a cloud, blotching his sight?"[14] The reader may experience what Leon Festinger terms "cognitive dissonance." Festinger describes this situation as the result of a person's encounter with information that contradicts his experience or with information that he wants to avoid.[15] Confrontation with violence, as in the novels of Joyce Carol Oates, runs counter to the usual, immediate, and personal experiences of most of us. It violates our sense of right action and feeling about what we ought to perceive. We have been taught to cringe at slaughter, even in an age in which it seems to flourish. Even those familiar with that aspect of life generally find its portrayal somewhat painful.

According to Festinger's theory, in order to regain cognitive balance and alleviate discomfort, a person (in this particular case, the reader) will try to resolve this disquieting information. If we ascribe to the hedonic philosophy of motivation, this is simply a matter of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. The reader may defend himself against passages which cause pain or disgust. A silent reader may skim the section, skip it entirely, or throw the book away, labeling it "gratuitous." A listener has similar perceptual defenses. He may listen selectively, be inattentive, or walk out of the performance. If the feeling of disgust or revulsion is great, the silent reader may discredit Oates as a novelist. The listener may discredit Oates and the oral reader as well. The alter-

natives are varied. The oral interpreter who approaches a performance of such material may liken his text to what C. William Colburn calls "fear-arousing appeals." He postulates "that the function of a persuasive speech is to present material which will create a state of psychological disequilibrium or imbalance."[16] Oates' fiction, much like the persuasive appeal, creates imbalance through its depiction of the "violent extremity and complexity of American life." Colburn further states that a persuasive message should offer some recommendation which, if accepted, will restore cognitive equilibrium.

In much of her literature, Oates offers such recommendation, or, as in the conclusion of "Matter and Energy," she at least suggests a moral resolution of the material. The indeterminate quality of this resolution demands sensitivity and imagination. The oral interpreter would do well to analyze his audience to determine these two prerequisites, for in performance it will be his duty to create and sustain the attitude of participation. This attitude must be maintained to such a degree that the feelings of discomfort and ill ease created by the imagery of violence may not be mitigated or dismissed. This disquiet, this "cognitive dissonance," is integral to a full realization of the text.

The possibility of "cognitive dissonance" engendered by the imagery of violence poses a challenge and a threat to the oral interpreter. He can, like the high-wire artist, create confidence and promote psychological participation. He may also stumble and force us to turn our faces from the horror of his fall. His ability must be grounded in skill, sensitivity, and a sense of the worth of his literature. He has an opportunity to help his audience live the questions: Why are we unable to understand ourselves and those around us? Does this inability breed violence? What are the

consequences of this violence?

Joyce Carol Oates and other authors who ask us to understand more deeply the violent aspect of our being offer us an opportunity to apprehend our world through the aesthetic experience, a problematic task for the oral interpreter. It is difficult to remain disturbed, to try to overcome one's tendency to resolve expeditiously the feelings of dissonce. We may, however, serve the literature, ourselves and our audience through an effort to realize fully the intent of the imagery of violence.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Joyce Carol Oates, "Matter and Energy," in The Wheel of Love (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1970), pp. 341-342.

[2]Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence," Newsweek, December 11, 1972, p. 72.

[3]Joyce Carol Oates, cited by Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence, Newsweek, December 11, 1972, p. 77.

[4]James McConkey, "Notes, Reviews and Speculations," review of With Shuddering Fall, by Joyce Carol Oates, in Epoch, 14 (Winter, 1965), 186.

[5]Elizabeth Dalton, cited by Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence," Newsweek, December 11, 1972, p. 72.

[6]Joyce Carol Oates, cited by Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence," Newsweek, December 11, 1972, p. 72.

[7]Joyce Carol Oates, With Shuddering Fall (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1964), p. 262.

[8]Ibid., p. 78.

[9]Joyce Carol Oates, cited by Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence," Newsweek, December 11, 1972, p. 72.

[10]Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," in Aspects of Narrative, ed. J. Hollis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 43.

[11]Joyce Carol Oates, "Matter and Energy," in The Wheel of Love (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1970), p. 361.

[12]Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," p. 14.

[13]Joyce Carol Oates, Wonderland (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1971), pp. 50-51.

[14]Ibid., p. 51.

[15]Leon Festinger, cited by Howard H. Martin, "The Limits of Communication Effects," in Speech Communication, ed. Howard H. Martin and Kenneth E. Andersen (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), p. 236.

[16]C. William Colburn, "Fear-Arousing Appeals," in Speech Communication, ed. Howard H. Martin and Kenneth E. Andersen (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), pp. 215-216.