

Palacký University Olomouc
Faculty of Arts
Department of English and American Studies

Bc. Petra Jurčišínová
Angel of Wrath: Gothic Features in Selected Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oates
Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.
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Prehlasujem, že som túto diplomovú prácu vypracovala samostatne a uviedla som všetky použité podklady a literatúru.

V Olomouci dňa:

Podpis:

Petra Jurčíšínová

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Introduction

Only a few concepts impact our lives more than emotions. Being a building block of our lives, they—often subconsciously—influence our decisions and impressions on a daily basis. One of them is especially persistent and ubiquitous, recurring stubbornly to the dismay of its experiencers. When confronted with the unknown, it sinks its claws into what feels like every ounce of our existence.

Fear is a constant in human experience, not to be ignored or underestimated. It is a notion in no way novel, tracing its roots back to the very beginning of times. There is almost a universal, bizarre fascination with the horrific, and understandably so. One could hardly imagine a world void of fear. Even though it is considered to be a negative emotion, its absence would seem virtually dystopic. But why do we find this feeling, both terrifying and chilling, yet so attractive to us?

Looking at it from an evolutionary perspective might shed some light on the underpinnings of society's curious fascination with horror. As Mathias Clasen points out, we use stories to make sense of ourselves and our world, and with scary stories particularly, the interest stems from a process of a purely Darwinian nature – a battle for survival and ensuring of our continued existence.¹ Overcoming adversity is in our nature. It is thus inherent in our biological and psychological setup.

Appealing to one of our most primal emotions, terror induced in the safety of our homes, as an easily monetizable industry, is booming. Horror as a genre, regardless of its form, has been achieving considerable success in recent years. Though its reputation has fluctuated throughout the years, it continues to establish its relevance, currently with the literary giant Stephen King frequently emerging in horror best-seller lists.

Yet, little attention has been devoted to a contemporary, less known yet equally prolific American author, Joyce Carol Oates. Only a handful of scholars have dedicated their time to the analysis of Gothic features in short fiction, and little to no research has been done on employment of Gothic features in Oates' innumerable short stories in particular.

For more than two centuries the short story has established itself as a prominent and popular form with a relatively rich literary tradition. When coupled with the Gothic

¹ Mathias Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4-6.

mode, it gives rise to a very appealing and fruitful combination, as the short form is highly flexible with narrative styles and techniques. Additionally, maintaining suspense is arguably more pertinent in a shorter form than a lengthy novel.²

Nonetheless, there are a small number of works that have been consistently consulted and drawn from in this thesis, especially Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* and Ellen Moers' *Literary Women*. Oates' Internet website, *Celestial Timepiece: A Joyce Carol Oates Patchwork*, as it is a legitimate scholarly resource led by an employee of University of San Francisco,³ has been consulted as well.

The thesis is organized into four sections. The first part of the thesis will look at Joyce Carol Oates' life and works with special emphasis on the exploration of activities and circumstances that have helped to form the author, defined her writing style and developed her inclination towards the Gothic. In the following chapter, a comprehensive overview of the development of the Gothic tradition, with a focus on the grotesque, the sublime, supernatural features and motifs, and the overall Gothic themes and impulses of the time, will be provided. A brief overview of the Female Gothic is presented as well.

The main body of work consists of a careful analysis of seven short stories written by Oates, namely "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966), "The Widows" (1977), "Haunted" (1987), "The Temple" (1996), "Subway" (2003), "Face" (2007), and "Big Momma" (2016). In my choice of the stories I have tried to select roughly one short story per one decade. The thesis dissects the literary methods used in Oates' work, with which she manages to subtly evoke particular emotional and psychological effects. In the last chapter, I adopt a feminist perspective, since all the short stories feature a female protagonist. By close reading the individual stories and situating them within the contemporary cultural context, I seek to illustrate the correlation between the power and the victim and how such relationship may be interpreted as a deft reflection of female fears and anxieties.

Further research is encouraged in order to expand on this previously neglected, but nevertheless interesting topic.

² Ellen Datlow, *Inferno: New Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* (New York: Tor/Tom Doherty Associates, 2007), 13.

³ Randy Souther, "About Celestial Timepiece," Celestial Timepiece, accessed 31.3.2021, <https://celestialtimepiece.com/2015/02/01/about-celestial-timepiece/>.

1. Life, Works and Influences of Joyce Carol Oates

To understand and analyze Oates' works, it is important to consider the author's background and influences. As can be argued with nearly any writer, they are inextricably linked and likely to complement the analysis. Examining the influences closely might provide a key to interpreting her oeuvre.

Perceived by many as a literary icon and included in school curricula all over the world, relatively little has been written on Joyce Carol Oates' life and biography. With plentiful literary criticism published about her work, it is remarkable that—in spite of her literary accomplishments and clout—hardly any work has been dedicated to solely chronicle her life, as perhaps might be the case for earlier authors of literary classics.

She has, though, given multiple interviews later in her life, which yield an interesting, if fragmentary, glance into the course of her life. For the most part, I drew from her essay collection *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*,⁴ which primarily deals with the narrative craft and literary art in general, yet contains some small bits from her life, and a collection of interviews by Lee Milazzo, *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*.⁵

Joyce Carol Oates was born in Lockport, New York on 16 June 1938 to Carolina Bush, a housewife of Hungarian ancestry, and Frederic James Oates, a manufacturer.⁶ Lockport, and generally the upstate New York environment in which she spent time as a child, would inevitably shape up the locations in which she would set her works, for instance Port Oriskany in *You Must Remember This*, Sparta in *Little Bird of Heaven* or High Point Farm in *We Were the Mulvaney's*. Oates categorically states that “the settings my characters inhabit are as crucial to me as the characters themselves,”⁷ and that “there are some stories [. . .] which evolved almost entirely out of their settings, usually rural.”⁸ As a child, she used to roam the surroundings of the family's residence: “I must have been a lonely child. Until the age of twelve or thirteen, my most intense, happiest hours were spent tramping desolate fields, woods, and creek banks near my

⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art* (New York: PerfectBound, 2003).

⁵ Lee Milazzo, ed., *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

⁶ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 14.

⁷ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 35.

⁸ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 74.

family's farmhouse in Millersport, New York."⁹ Such experiences would serve as a valuable source for her later writing.

When Oates was fourteen years old, her grandfather gifted her her first typewriter. Her grandfather, influencing her significantly, frequently appears in her work.¹⁰ Describing the household she lived in as "work-oriented,"¹¹ Oates did not follow in anyone's footsteps, but rather paved the literary way herself, treasuring Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* she had been given by her grandmother. Designating *Alice* books as of the utmost importance, altering her view on life altogether, she claims they were: "the most profound literary influence of my life. This was love at first sight! (Very likely, I fell in love with the phenomenon of Book, too.)"¹²

She strongly identifies with Alice – a lone, level-headed heroine facing fantastic and nightmarish situations, who fell down the rabbit hole and, figuratively speaking, "never entirely returned to 'real' life."¹³ Oates astutely deems *Alice in Wonderland*:

A classic for children that is also preoccupied with dying, death, and being eaten; perhaps more terrifying, being physically transformed into freakish shapes. [. . .] Children's literature, especially in the past, did not shrink from depictions of cruelty and sadism; Lewis Carroll [. . .] understood instinctively the child's nervous propensity to laugh at the very things that arouse anxiety: injustice, abrupt death, disappearing, being devoured. [. . .] At the periphery of many of my poems and works of fiction, as in the corner of an eye, there is often an element of the grotesque or surreal.¹⁴

An air of dreaminess and imagination can in fact be noticed in various works by Oates, where intangible surrealism mixes with menacing playfulness. Such can be observed for instance in her 1971 *Wonderland*, a bizarre novel organized around Carroll's stories, that deals with one of her most favorite topics, a theme she calls "the phantasmagoria of personality,"¹⁵ or an ostentatious examination of character.

The previously mentioned scarcity of biographical data could lead to speculation that her childhood was uninteresting and ordinary. Oates refers to her Roman-Catholic,

⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, "They All Just Went Away," in *The Best American Essays of the Century*, Joyce Carol Oates, and Robert Atwan, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000), 553.

¹⁰ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 93.

¹¹ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

¹⁵ Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Dutton, 1998), xv.

multi-generation family as being “a happy, close-knit and unextraordinary family for our time, place and economic status.”¹⁶ Yet, Oates sporadically mentions traumatizing events. Oates claims her schoolteacher had to, among other tasks, keep discipline in a classroom, where older boys would—often cruelly—harass and even sexually assault younger children.¹⁷ Such a jarring experience during a child’s formative years undoubtedly affects and forms the person who, consciously or subconsciously, draws from it in later life. To put it another way, this might have contributed to Oates’ affinity towards dark and violent themes.

Despite such shortcomings, Oates would revere the classroom, for it not only provided her with the ability to read and write, but also enabled her to escape from the harsh realities of the ‘real’, outside world.¹⁸ In *Conversations*, Milazzo comments: “If there was much that was terrible about where she grew up as a child, there was something attractive about the roughness of that world, the little hamlet, the old graveyard, her friends’ ramshackle houses full of children.”¹⁹ Such idyllic, romantic reverie mixed with coarseness and trauma would be reflected in her later Gothic writing.

Oates does not come from an educated background; in fact, she was the first of her family to finish high school. Subsequently, being an ardent and gifted student, she attained a Syracuse University scholarship, where she would study English.²⁰

In 1961, she met Raymond J. Smith at the University of Wisconsin where she was working on her master’s degree; in three weeks’ time, they were married.²¹ Oates moved a great deal during her lifetime, living in various places: from Detroit, which she recreated in her *Do With Me What You Will*, through a sabbatical leave in London, where she experienced persistent homesickness, to Canada, where she would move in 1968 and fill the position of Associate Professor of English at the University of Windsor in Ontario.²²

Two years later, Oates’ debut short-story collection was published. *By the North Gate* displays the author’s vibrant, yet delicate competence to write about

¹⁶ Oates, “They All Just Went Away,” 555.

¹⁷ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 11-34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 93.

²⁰ Johnson, *Invisible Writer*, xvii.

²¹ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 36.

²² Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 31-32; Greg Johnson, ed., *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates: 1973-1982* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), vii.

human despair. The early 1970s were an essential period with regard to the development of Oates' short fiction, as during this era, Oates' writing underwent controlled stylistic and genre experimentation.²³

In 1969, Oates published *them*, a semi-autobiographical naturalist novel set in Detroit examining intricate struggles of Maureen, Loretta and Jules as they strive to fulfill their visions of the American Dream. Winning the National Book Award in 1970, the work has been celebrated and considered as one of her most recognizable feats, harboring considerable commercial success. In the same year, *Expensive People*, a suburban Gothic tale, was nominated for the National Book Award.

In the first half of the 1970s, Oates' rise to early fame ensued. With the help of *them*, magazine coverage and innumerable successful short stories—including multiple O. Henry Awards—Oates, beginning to be in the public's eye, emerged as one of the most promising, though controversial, literary figures in the country.

Them would prove to be important not only in terms of Oates' literary career but would also serve as useful experience with the Gothic themes and features. In "The Decadent Family: Social Criticism in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," Patricia Ann Slater Box claims that "the overt gothic elements [. . .] rampant in the fiction seem to suggest [. . .] that she is writing in the gothic tradition."²⁴ Additionally, the American novelist Geoffrey Wolff states in "Gothic City" that:

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 stabbing, beatings, crime, riot and even unhappiness. Its ruling principles are hate and violence.²⁵

Though *them* was applauded for its dramatic dynamicity, a few of her other works such as *The Goddess and Other Women* or *The Hungry Ghosts* received mixed reviews and several disparaging remarks. It follows that her approach toward literary critics and reviews became rather apprehensive. At this time, Oates decided to adopt and write under various pseudonyms.²⁶ That provided Oates with a great deal of liberation and anonymity, detaching herself from any restrictions, be it gender stereotypes or societal

²³ Susana Isabel Araújo, "Marriages and Infidelities: Joyce Carol Oates's Way Out of the Labyrinths of Metafiction," *Women's Studies* 33 (2004): 103.

²⁴ Patricia Ann Slater Box, "The Decadent Family: Social Criticism in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates" (master's thesis, Texas Tech University, 1975), 2, accessed 4.3. 2021, <https://ttu-ir.tdl.org/handle/2346/13619?locale-attribute=en>.

²⁵ Geoffrey Wolff, "Gothic City," *Newsweek*, September 29, 1969, 120-121.

²⁶ Johnson, *Invisible Writer*, 240-244.

expectations. Even being reluctant to adopt the label ‘writer’, Oates views her writing persona in a sort of detached manner, referring to it with the acronym ‘JCO’. Arguing that while writing exists and writers do not, she denotes JCO not as a real person but a “process that has resulted in a sequence of texts,”²⁷ rendering her writing rather ageless. Since Oates identifies herself as a feminist “sympathizer”²⁸—as Eileen T. Bender states in her *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence*—Joyce’s work is also characterized by profound femininity, often featuring idealistic heroines faced with adversity.

In 1974, Oates and her husband founded a literary journal called *The Ontario Review, A North American Journal of the Arts*. Trying to bridge the gap in literature between the United States and Canada, *The Ontario Review* consistently published original works by various authors, including Saul Bellow, Raymond Carver or Doris Lessing, to mention a few.²⁹

In 1978, Oates and her husband moved from Windsor, Canada to Princeton, New Jersey to a residence supposedly resembling a glass castle.³⁰ Oates admits that, among others, a mere “scene [of her surroundings] glimpsed from a window,” supplies her with necessary inspiration:

All the desks of my life have faced windows and [. . .] I have always spent most of my time staring out the window, noting what is there, daydreaming, or brooding. Most of the so-called imaginative life is encompassed by these three activities that blend so seamlessly together, not unlike reading the dictionary, as I often do as well, entire mornings can slip by, in a blissful daze of preoccupation. It’s bizarre to me that people think that I am ‘prolific’ and that I must use every spare minute of my time when in fact, as my intimates have always known, I spend most of my time looking out the window.³¹

While the often-used literary stamp ‘prolific’ not only does not entirely do Joyce Carol Oates justice, she ostensibly harbors apprehension to such label, evading it.

In 1980, *Bellefleur*, an experimental novel written in the vein of magical realism, was published. Encouraged by its success, Oates dedicated the majority of the decade to writing what would eventually constitute a unified Gothic saga, publishing

²⁷ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 41-42.

²⁸ Eileen Teper Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), xi.

²⁹ Raymond J. Smith, “About This Journal,” Online Archive of *The Ontario Review*, last modified May 2, 2018, accessed 4.3.2021, <https://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/about.html>.

³⁰ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 152.

³¹ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 138.

A Bloodsmoor Romance in 1982 and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* in 1984. More recent additions to the saga are *My Heart Laid Bare* (1998) and finally *The Accursed* (2013), which is, according to horror giant Stephen King, “the world’s first postmodern Gothic novel.”³²

With Oates’ husband’s death in 2008, *The Ontario Review* ceased publication. A year after her husband’s passing, she married a Princeton professor Charles Gross, who died in 2019.³³

Oates immensely enjoyed teaching English at Princeton University. Her former colleague and friend, a feminist figure Elaine Showalter, recounts Oates’ words from her retirement gala in 2014: “Unlike writing, an obsessively solitary activity which can be fraught with dissatisfaction, anxiety, frustration and dread, teaching — at Princeton, certainly — has been an unqualified joy.”³⁴

Since 2016, Oates has been providing creative short fiction lessons at Berkeley. Arguably, there is hardly a person more qualified when it comes to short fiction, considering her ample experience and special relationship with the format of short story: “Brief subjects require brief statements. There is *nothing* so difficult as a novel, as anyone knows who has attempted one; a short story is bliss to write.”³⁵ As of 2021, an interested reader might undertake online video lessons at the MasterClass website, where Oates “teaches the Art of the Short Story.”³⁶ However, her online presence extends even further. Oates is very active on the online social media Twitter, where she does not refrain from posting her unfiltered opinion on a myriad of sensitive topics including religion, politics, and race.³⁷ Controversy has accompanied Oates for her whole life in multiple forms - not only in terms of her art and literary themes,³⁸ but also regarding her views and media output, contributing to her public image as a controversial figure.

³² Stephen King, “Bride of Hades,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2013, accessed 4.3. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/books/review/the-accursed-by-joyce-carol-oates.html?pagewanted=all>.

³³ Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow’s Story: A Memoir* (New York: Ecco Press, 2011), 415; Joyce Carol Oates, *The Lost Landscape: A Writer’s Coming of Age* (New York: Ecco Press, 2015), 187.

³⁴ Elaine Showalter, “Joyce Carol Oates honored at retirement gala,” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2014, accessed 4.3. 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/11/09/joyce-carol-oates-honored-at-retirement-gala/>.

³⁵ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 78.

³⁶ “Joyce Carol Oates Teaches the Art of the Short Story,” MasterClass, accessed 4.3. 2021, <https://www.masterclass.com/classes/joyce-carol-oates-teaches-the-art-of-the-short-story>.

³⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, Twitter, accessed 4.3. 2021, <https://twitter.com/JoyceCarolOates>.

³⁸ Greg Johnson, “Blonde Ambition: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates” in *The Faith of a Writer*, 143.

When asked about her influences, Oates claims: “I’ve been reading for so many years, and my influences must be so vast—it would be very difficult to answer.”³⁹ Yet, Oates openly credits and acknowledges various literary figures and works as immensely influential on multiple occasions. As a child, she was drawn to predominantly classical literature written by exclusively male authors, though, as she aptly remarks, “[she] was too young to know that Hawthorne, Emerson, Poe, Melville, et al. were ‘classics’.”⁴⁰ Her literary influences include her father’s copy of Poe’s *The Gold Bug and Other Stories*.⁴¹ It was perhaps this peculiar literary figure that helped to form the foundations of Oates’ affection towards the Gothic.

Even though genre classification of a given author is rarely conclusive, Oates is especially problematic to categorize. She admits: “I may have absorbed from Poe the predilection for moving fluidly through genres, and grounding the surreal in the seeming ‘reality’ of an earnest, impassioned voice.”⁴² Her vast array of novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction renders her a multi-faceted author. She is regularly connected with the Gothic literature containing violence and abuse. Oates aptly remarks that “what is meant by *Gothic*, in fact, is debatable.”⁴³ But why does she write about such dark topics?

Oates ardently believes that inner turmoil and confronting the repressed or prohibited parts of our interests serve as a perfect means for one’s creative outlet. These deep, private, internal forces, when addressed and given proper focus, have a propelling effect on a writer. Writing unapologetically, combined with confronting taboos, is according to Oates the prerequisite for substantial and meaningful art.⁴⁴ Oates discloses: “I don’t consider light-hearted comedy and [. . .] casual things the highest art. For me, I want to write about people in extremes. I want to write about things that matter. And heart-bending little things.”⁴⁵ Just as Poe is preoccupied with madness and murder, Oates is preoccupied with violence and the gloomy parts of life.

³⁹ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 74.

⁴⁰ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴³ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 139.

⁴⁴ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 23-24.

⁴⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, “A Discussion with Joyce Carol Oates,” filmed February 16, 2010 at The Kelly Writers House, Philadelphia, PA, video, 31:21 – 31:40, accessed 22.4.2021, <http://writing.upenn.edu/wh/multimedia/tv/reruns/watch/88332>.

Among the author's later influences are Henry James, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and, perhaps to the delight of Czech readers, Franz Kafka. An eclectic mixture indeed, we should note that the list is not exhaustive and includes a host of other writers which will not be dealt with due to limited scope of the chapter. On Nietzsche she remarks: "As an undergraduate at Syracuse University I discovered Nietzsche and it may be the Nietzschean influence (which is certainly far more provocative than Freud's) that characterizes some of my work."⁴⁶ Conversely, with such massive literary presence, it is only natural other authors took inspiration in her. These include figures such as Jhumpa Lahiri or C. K. Williams.⁴⁷

Evidently, Oates seems to sympathize with French and German existentialist school and displays interest in philosophical and psychological matters. She places Jung beside Nietzsche, holding both in high regard and applauding their genius. Thorough multi-disciplinary knowledge allows her to paint a fairly realistic picture of her characters' mental turmoil, which proves fruitful, as majority of her work—along with her short stories included in this thesis—deal with the psychology of the characters to a great extent. Notably, Oates has a penchant for featuring deranged characters, such as the madman Hugh Petrie in *The Assassins* or the literary incarnation of Jeffrey Dahmer in her gruesome novel *Zombie*.⁴⁸

A crucial leisure-time activity which provides her with creative stimuli is running. Oates draws a parallel between running and dreaming—a process associated with creativity—for both are inseparably tied to awareness.⁴⁹ During running, she would encounter places which would serve as an inspiration for her works. For instance, glimpsing the ruin of a railroad bridge would lead her to the plot of *You Must Remember This*.⁵⁰

This thorough, yet concise examination of Oates' biography has explored her main impetuses for writing, a combination of the surroundings and literary influences she has been subjected to in her early childhood. This shaped her into the established figure she is today, a literary behemoth that has been astonishing readers with her voluminous work for the last five decades.

⁴⁶ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 74.

⁴⁷ Showalter, "Joyce Carol Oates honored at retirement gala."

⁴⁸ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

2. Danse Macabre: Of Horror and the Gothic

Ever since the ancient humans sat around the fire and listened to the mysterious folk tales, legends, and stories, the Gothic tradition has demonstrated a strong attraction. It retained a strange magnetism until today, luring readers and movie-goers from all around the world. With its remarkable commercial success, there is no doubt Gothic horror has firmly established itself among other genres of art. Its history, tradition and developments are equally as rich and multi-faceted, and I believe its accurate account would be helpful in analyzing and explaining the Gothic features in this thesis. After all, in *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, Snodgrass postulates that “analysis discloses familiar elements at the heart of originality.”⁵¹ Notably, the Gothic developments in poetry, such as *The Graveyard School*, will be disregarded in this chapter, as this thesis’ focus is prose.

Perhaps the most appropriate starting point would be the definition of the term. It is important to note that the meaning of the word varies according to the context. Additionally, its meaning shifted and changed throughout history.

‘The Gothic’, a notion that Marie Mulvey-Roberts in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* describes as a “semantic vortex,”⁵² has multiple possible connotations, from the Germanic tribe of Goths to an architectural revival from the middle ages. In contemporary literary terms, though, the Gothic represents a post-renaissance literary narrative mode that concerns horrifying and supernatural experiences, usually with an oppressing and mysterious atmosphere.⁵³ In fact, the connection of ‘Gothic’ to literature of terror is relatively new – ‘Gothic novel’ as a literary term was coined in the 1900s.⁵⁴ Nowadays, the label ‘Gothic’ is perceived as archaic and remains relevant rather in the academia than the wide public, where horror literature is heard more frequently.

This “confused and self-contradictory form”⁵⁵ as Maggie Kilgour nicely describes it in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*—is, like the term itself—highly unstable and

⁵¹ Mary E. Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), xiii.

⁵² Marie Mulvey-Roberts, *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998), 92.

⁵³ Dinah Birch and Katy Hooper, *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 813.

⁵⁴ E. J. Clery, “The Genesis of ‘Gothic’ Fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

⁵⁵ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

variable. Its dynamicity renders its definition and development of its exact features a rather formidable task.

2.1 Walpole's Legacy

A matter of predominantly western culture, the Gothic tradition spans over almost three centuries. While certain features commonly associated with the Gothic tradition might be certainly found in earlier works—for instance a depiction of a ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or the devil in Milton's *Paradise Lost*—some tracing it as far as Scheherezade's *The Arabian Nights*,⁵⁶ the first work more or less uniformly considered to be 'Gothic' is *The Castle of Otranto*. The novel, which blends ancient and modern romance,⁵⁷ was a major impetus that initiated the Gothic tradition.

Published anonymously in 1764, the English politician, antiquarian and writer Horace Walpole disguised the work initially as an authentic Italian manuscript. After the novel's great public success, Walpole re-issued it a year later—with a new preface and a descriptive subtitle "A Gothic Story"—and disclosed his identity.⁵⁸ Interestingly, at the time of the novel's publication, the word "Gothic" possessed a slightly derogatory sense, signifying something outdated and antiquated.⁵⁹

The Castle of Otranto features inexplicable events surrounding Manfred, the aristocratic lord of the castle and his family, Isabella, Theodore and Matilda. Taking place in Italy, the tale is ripe with prophecies, love, and persecution. Interestingly, the story of *The Castle of Otranto* supposedly occurred to Walpole as a dream.⁶⁰ This notion of a Gothic writer as a sort of passive medium can be paralleled to Oates' claims about the views and images occurring to her during running.

Walpole and his novel produced numerous progenies, for instance Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1778). In its preface, Reeve states:

This story is the literary offspring of the Castle of Otranto, written upon the same plan, with a design to unite the most attractive and interesting circumstances of the ancient Romance and modern Novel, at the same time it assumes a character and manner of its

⁵⁶ Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, xiii.

⁵⁷ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (Waiheke Island: The Floating Press, 2009), 21.

⁵⁸ Mulvey-Roberts, *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, 81.

⁵⁹ Clery, "The Genesis," 21.

⁶⁰ David Stevens, *The Gothic Tradition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29.

own, that differs from both; it is distinguished by the appellation of a Gothic Story, being a picture of Gothic times and manners.⁶¹

Another extremely prominent figure in what later would be called horror literature, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, claimed in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* that:

it remained for a very sprightly and worldly Englishman – none other than Horace Walpole himself – to give the growing impulse definite shape and become the actual founder of the literary horror-story as a permanent form. Fond of mediæval romance and mystery as a dilettante's diversion, and with a quaintly imitated Gothic castle as his abode at Strawberry Hill, Walpole in 1764 published *The Castle of Otranto*; a tale of the supernatural which, though thoroughly unconvincing and mediocre in itself, was destined to exert an almost unparalleled influence on the literature of the weird.⁶²

Clearly, Walpole's legacy and influence on the genre were unprecedented and long-lasting. The novel's resonance stemmed not only from its use of the supernatural elements, such as giant apparitions, audibly clunking armor, or a portrait coming to life but also Walpole's establishment of the feature of past anxieties that symbolically catch up with and haunt the protagonist, either physically or psychologically. *The Castle of Otranto* would lead to the establishment of various classic Gothic tropes such as medieval trappings or placement of focus on the environment, which would often include abandoned buildings, castles, dungeons and imprisonment within, graveyards, prisons, factories, et cetera.

Not long before the author died in 1797, there had been a massive boom of the genre throughout Europe and briefly the new United States, especially popular among women.⁶³ In its earliest form, then, the Gothic novel dealt with the experiences of the past, often set in the mediaeval times, and was made to appeal to popular tastes, which expressed demand for the spiritual and extraordinary. As with many literary movements, what served as a catalyst for Gothicism was a combination of the European socio-political, cultural and perhaps religious factors of the particular time.

2.2 From Lewis and Radcliffe to Brockden Brown and Poe

The eighteenth-century emergence of the Gothic novel was mainly interpreted as a reaction to the Age of Reason and rejection of the secular tendencies, a sentiment shared with Romanticism. Additionally, the form intermingled Gothic with

⁶¹ Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, ed. James Trainer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.

⁶² Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 7.

⁶³ Hogle, *Gothic Fiction*, I.

sentimental conventions, examined the notion of evil and addressed social and national changes.⁶⁴

While reacting to an anti-enlightenment impulse, the form possessed a distinct sense of self-reflection and self-consciousness. David Punter claims in his *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* that in Matthew Gregory Lewis' hastily written, narratively convoluted Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796), "Lewis, taking the antirealist process a step further, begins the essentially Gothic construction of a world of mutually self-validating fictions which are texturally more 'real' than reality itself."⁶⁵ With unreal and often surreal concepts, the Gothic emphasizes its own exaggerated fictionality. Lewis' use of questionable methods elucidated a strong response at the time, and though it had many defenders and sold well, many indignantly criticized its extravagance and controversiality.⁶⁶

Another crucial author of the close of the eighteenth century was Ann Radcliffe. Mutual influence existed between Lewis and Radcliffe - the general consensus being that they lie on the opposite sides of the spectrum when it comes to narrative techniques and thematic preoccupation. While Lewis focuses on the shocking and the horrific, Radcliffe rationalizes and justifies her use of the supernatural. Both, though, virtually examine the connection of the individual to his surroundings.⁶⁷

Ann Radcliffe often employed images and conceptions drawn from Romanticism, such as one of her delicate, defenseless heroines Ellena in *The Italian* (1797). She would help to establish the Female Gothic, which I will discuss in greater detail in subchapter 2.5. Her quintessential Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) was parodied by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Moreover, Ann Radcliffe was a proponent of a distinction between the notions of terror and horror as pointedly different literary effects. In Radcliffe's view presented in her "On the Supernatural in Poetry," terror and horror are "so far the opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them."⁶⁸ While terror inspires with ambiguity and vagueness, horror

⁶⁴ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 48.

⁶⁵ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (New York: Longman, 1996), Vol. 1: 62.

⁶⁶ Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 26-27.

⁶⁷ Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 64.

⁶⁸ Ann Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," in *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook, 1700 – 1820*, E. J. Clery and Robert Miles, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 168.

paralyzes by ostensibly showing the source or portrayal of danger. However, it seems that these terms are often used interchangeably by others.

To terror is connected the sublime, a term proposed by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Radcliffe showed a predilection for the sublime in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, with her magnificent sceneries and landscapes. The sublime was de facto inaugurated by Longinus in the ancient times, but Burke re-introduced it as a component of terror within literary context.

This concept of the sublime, according to Smith, prompts aesthetically grand emotions of insignificance.⁶⁹ Similar in essence to terms such as the transcendental or the picaresque, in Mary Arensberg's view specified in her *The American Sublime*, the Romantic sublime of Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth dealt with the bridge between individual man and nature. The sublime is "the realm of things beyond ourselves."⁷⁰ Furthermore, Arensberg maintains that: "the eighteenth-century sublime becomes obsessed not with the moment of restored power or identification, but with the moment of breaking or the experience of discontinuity that precedes the sublimatory act."⁷¹ The Gothic sublime is not, though, denoting a mere appreciation for the natural beauty. The sublime draws from the potential for awe and terror that emphasizes limitations, overloading the experiencer with simultaneous dread and astonishment. It contrasts the bilateral nature of awe – providing a source of satisfaction and dread. It is closely tied to the human experience in that its central emotional response is anxiety. It is paradoxical in nature as it is both human, since it is affective and emotional, and inhuman in that it trespasses 'beyond human'.

Related to emotions of dissatisfaction, the images of the Gothic sublime, while intense, are put into distance and adequately softened by transformative representations, so the terror can be enjoyed.⁷² The concept was later further developed by figures like Weiskel or Kant.

Though the Gothic tradition was most pervasive in the Anglo-Saxon world, the American Gothic tradition was on the rise with Charles Brockden Brown and his *Wieland: or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798). The difference between

⁶⁹ Smith, *Gothic Literature*, 11-12.

⁷⁰ Mary Arensberg, *The American Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 1.

⁷¹ Arensberg, *The American Sublime*, 4-5.

⁷² Hogle, *Gothic Fiction*, 14.

Brown's American and the British Gothic tradition of Radcliffe and Lewis lies, according to Andrew Smith, in the narrative style and point of focus. While Brown is concerned with the past, history and individual identity and employs non-supernatural reading, Radcliffe shifts the focus and is preoccupied with class and the Walpolean Gothic problem of aristocracy.⁷³

Other notable works of the end of the 18th century include William Beckford's *Vathek* (1782), William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and W. H. Ireland's *The Abbess* (1798). The Gothic's affluence abated for twenty years, but its prosperity was restored in 1818 with Mary Shelley's publication of her groundbreaking Gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. *Frankenstein* emerged as a result of a literary contest between her, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron.⁷⁴ Perhaps the most famous Gothic novel, it fully penetrated the cultural conscience, establishing Shelley, William Godwin's daughter, a pre-eminent Gothic writer whose contribution is not to be underestimated. *Frankenstein*, the story of the consequences of the scientist Viktor Frankenstein's creation of an abominable creature which would ultimately be his undoing, scrutinizes the question of social and psychological inequity as well as anxiety over technological advancement.

Incidentally, the fifth chapter of the novel opens with a stylized description of a gloomy setting: "It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld accomplishment of my toils."⁷⁵ As established earlier, the setting and its distinctive qualities play an integral part in the Gothic. The beginning of the chapter would perhaps serve as a forerunner of what would become an often-parodied phrase introduced in a novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830): "it was a dark and stormy night."⁷⁶ It was Bulwer-Lytton who, at its nadir, boosted the Gothic tradition with *Pelham* (1828).⁷⁷ A notable work of that era is also Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).

The 19th century Gothic in America saw the appearance of a literary avatar and a pioneer of detective short story Edgar Allan Poe. His versatility, innovation and imaginativeness contributed enormously to the Gothic genre. His Gothic tales such as

⁷³ Smith, *Gothic Literature*, 40-41.

⁷⁴ Stevens, *The Gothic Tradition*, 29.

⁷⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 43.

⁷⁶ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1930), 1.

⁷⁷ Mulvey-Roberts, *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, 33.

“The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Black Cat” or “The Fall of the House of Usher” mixed thrill with mesmerizing psychological intricacies that remain the subject of study until today. Poe gravitated towards the themes of consciousness in disarray, madness, emotionally disturbed states and addressed mainly American concerns. His focus on human mind fell on fertile ground with psychoanalysts like Marie Bonaparte or Jacques Lacan, who interpreted and analyzed the tales within Freud’s framework of dreams, the subconscious and surrealism. Poe is credited with having adopted a “new approach to the sublime,” as the sublime itself is “an artistic effect in Poe’s writing.”⁷⁸ Poe also utilizes grotesque, as the conveniently named *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* suggest. The word ‘grotesque’, deriving from Italian ‘grottesca’, which developed from ‘grotta’ or a cave, is a term that originated in the 15th century, though it was only in the 18th century that it started to occur as a literary term. Presumably, ‘grotta’ designated ludicrous, strange murals revealed by excavations in ancient Roman caverns. The term is commonly understood as a feature co-occurring with the Gothic and the Fantastic literary forms. Popularized through Victor Hugo’s *Cromwell*, it can entail real-life contortion, appearing or behaving in a bizarre and abnormal manner and can frequently contain sudden shifts from the serious to the comic and vice versa.⁷⁹

Though not exclusively a writer of Gothic, a few of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s works, such as “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) or “The White Old Maid” (1835) are written in the Gothic horror vein.

2.3 Fin de Siècle Gothic

Though Gothic was not the most prominent genre in the Victorian era, it was visible in the so-called Penny Dreadfuls, an inexpensive miscellany, also called a Gothic bluebook, made to appeal to the masses.⁸⁰ In general terms, though, 19th century Britain saw the incorporation of the Gothic into the realist novel and sensation fiction which was a popular genre of that time, and the Gothic started to explore the questions of sexuality and racial issues. The Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu contributed to the Gothic with a work of sensation fiction *Uncle Silas* (1864) and a lesbian vampire novella *Carmilla* (1872).

⁷⁸ Justin Quinn, ed., *Lectures on American Literature* (Prague: Karolinum, 2011), 77.

⁷⁹ Mulvey-Roberts, *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, 273.

⁸⁰ Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, 150.

The Gothic reached another peak in the 1890s. Over the course of the 1800s, the notion of evil became increasingly internalized. Ghost stories as well as Gothic doubles emerge, as exemplified in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or Henry James' novella "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). These elements often reflected the underlying concern about metaphysical questions regarding identity or social and economic concerns and, as Carol Margaret Davidson aptly remarks in her *Gothic Literature 1764-1824*, the Gothic remained "a barometer of sociocultural anxieties."⁸¹ The Gothic environment moves gradually from remote castles to urban settings, such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).⁸² Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), a short story that blends realism and Gothicism, is especially important in that, through the form of a journal, it captures madness and male oppression.⁸³ However, perhaps the most prominent work of the *fin de siècle* Gothic was Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Punter groups *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Dracula* and *Picture of Dorian Gray* together, claiming their thematic and symbolic interconnectedness stems from dealing with deterioration and the aspect of humanness.⁸⁴ Francis Marion Crawford contributed to the Gothic with his supernatural short stories "The Witch of Prague" (1891) and later "The Screaming Skull" (1908).

2.4 The Specters of the 20th century and the New Gothic Canon

Sources differ on the label of what ensued in the early 20th century, from 'neo-Gothic' or the New Gothic to modernist Gothic. Nonetheless, Smith claims that "in the twentieth century the term 'Gothic' tends to become replaced with 'Horror', at least where popular literature is concerned."⁸⁵

Works such as M. R. James' *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), William Hope Hodgson's short story "The Voice in the Night" (1907) or *The House on the Borderland* (1908) would serve as a testimony to the flourishing of the supernatural even at the onset of 20th century. A sense of ennui surrounding the monsters, vampires and ghouls of the 19th century was replaced by the cosmic horror of H. P. Lovecraft. Influenced by Poe, Lovecraft would follow in his footsteps and be a leading figure of

⁸¹ Carol Margaret Davidson, *Gothic Literature 1764-1824* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009): 21.

⁸² Smith, *Gothic Literature*, 117.

⁸³ Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 317-18.

⁸⁴ Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 25.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Gothic Literature*, 140.

the horror literature with his founding of the Cthulhu mythos. His works of fiction, including “The Call of Cthulhu,” was printed in the *Weird Tales*, an American pulp magazine which made the genre accessible, in 1928.

The Gothic diminished for a while, as the 1930s were dominated by literature of mimetic realism of Hemingway or Faulkner. Later, Ray Bradbury—though being best known for his *Fahrenheit 451*—emerged, writing in a plethora of genres from fantasy through sci-fi to psychological horror such as in “The Crowd” (1947). The 1950s and 60s saw the emergence of variety of authors such as Theodore Sturgeon, Richard Matheson or Shirley Jackson with her “Lottery” (1948) or *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). Drawing from Lovecraft, Robert Bloch wrote in the vein of psychological suspense, his most notable works being *Psycho* (1959) and *American Gothic* (1974). British Gothic was infused with the thrill of Daphne du Marier and the supernaturalism of Robert Aickman.

Many of the Gothic works would be translated to other forms of media, such as film and radio, which boosted the genre’s popularity immensely. Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967), Blatty’s *Exorcist* (1971) and Tryon’s *Other* (1971) not only demonstrated anti-Christian sentiment and a new, increasing fear of, as Steven Bruhm puts it, “foreign otherness and monstrous invasion,”⁸⁶ but their film adaptations elevated the Gothic’s status and brought it to public consciousness. Rod Sterling’s *The Twilight Zone* arguably led to horror as the best-selling phenomenon of the time.

After the 1970s, the Gothic is marked by engagement with postmodernism. Even though there is still an ongoing debate on what classifies as Gothic,⁸⁷ a few trends are distinguishable. While contemporary Gothic continues with the fixation on the past and experiments with chronology, as in Stephen King’s *It*, the central problem remains the human condition and individual interior life. Familial dynamics and domestic environment become disrupted, as the person in society strives for being accepted while remaining alienated and separated. The vampire tradition is revived with Anne Rice’s famous *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Nowadays, figures such as Ramsey Campbell, T.E.D. Klein, Thomas Ligotti, Peter Straub, Caitlín R. Kiernan, Clive Barker, Dean Koontz or China Miéville rank among the Neo-Gothicists, though the literature of terror is unarguably dominated by King. While retaining their originality,

⁸⁶ Steven Bruhm, “The contemporary Gothic: why we need it,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 260.

⁸⁷ Bruhm, “The contemporary Gothic,” 259.

many of them draw on and utilize the Gothic conventions introduced in this chapter. Joyce Carol Oates holds a secure position between them. Since the beginning of the tradition in the Walpolean fiction, the Gothic has spurred a variety of subgenres and continues to be a prominent, though a bit controversial literary form.

2.5 A Damsel in Distress: A Short Overview of the Female Experience in the Gothic Tradition

It is important to clarify that this subchapter does not seek to present an extensive overview of women's writing and literary feminist theory overall. Though milestones such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* or Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* are no doubt crucial to the development of the female literary scene and criticism, I aim to focus solely on Female Gothic fiction, as is in accordance with this thesis' main preoccupation.

The Gothic literary tradition is inextricably linked to the notion of gender on multiple levels. "The focus on the victimised, but often defiant, position of women,"⁸⁸ as formulated by Mulvey-Roberts, is in the very definition of the Gothic, this intrinsic feature emerging with Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. Furthermore, ever since its conception roughly in the 18th century, Gothic literature was written and read by women in a sort of mutual exchange, as many journals—for instance *The Lady's Magazine*—promoted reader submissions and published many Gothic tales. Clara Reeve, Charlotte Dacre, Mary Shelley, but above all Ann Radcliffe were the early proponents of the Female Gothic.⁸⁹ The term itself, though, came into existence only with the publication of Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* in 1976. In this seminal work of feminist criticism, Moers not only coins the term, but lays the foundation for the entire field, for which she is widely credited. Since then, there have been many reworkings of the label, and the Female Gothic has become a subject of great debate, especially after the 1990s, when it departed from the predilected Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations to the socio-cultural readings.⁹⁰ It was then when the Female Gothic entered the mainstream and became a truly burgeoning literary field.

⁸⁸ Mulvey-Roberts, *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, 82.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹⁰ Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, eds., *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 5.

Naturally, Moers emphasizes the volatility and vagueness of the term ‘the Gothic’, which by implication renders the definition of the Female Gothic once again rather problematic, as acknowledged by many critics. Nonetheless, Moers views the Female Gothic as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic,” a genre affiliated with fear.⁹¹ After all, to cite Joanna Baillie and her Gothic *Orra*, “there is a joy in fear,”⁹² and women are far from immune to it.

Above all, Moers analyzes the sophistication of the 18th and 19th century women writers, detailing the underpinnings of Radcliffe’s and Shelley’s writings. While Radcliffe pioneered the Female Gothic, her novels establishing the inexorably persecuted heroines fleeing from male tyrants and their mazelike castles and entrapments through fantastical sceneries, Shelley introduced a narrative that did not feature a heroine nor a female victim, but portrayed the birth myth as a Gothic fantasy. Moers stresses the implicit focus on motherhood—as it was common in the era for female writers to be spinsters and virgins—even accentuating the implicit femininity of “the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences [. . .] the trauma of the afterbirth.”⁹³ Most importantly, though, Moers discloses that the Female Gothic articulates female displeasure with patriarchal society, the horrors of domesticity, and addresses anxieties of being trapped within the female body.

After Moers’ *Literary Women*, a plethora of works developing the tradition ensued. Juliann E. Fleenor’s *The Female Gothic*, drawing from *Literary Women*, contributed to the field with the interpretation of the Gothic texts as a metaphor for the female condition.⁹⁴ In 1990, Eugenia C. DeLamotte laid the foundations for understanding the Female Gothic formula as a narrative where the supernatural is explained and where an unhappy ending is thwarted.⁹⁵ Five years later, Robert Miles carefully analysed Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* within the Female Gothic narrative of victimized heroine who is not only seeking an absent mother but is also pursued by

⁹¹ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 90.

⁹² Joanna Baillie, *Orra: A Tragedy*, in *A Series of Plays* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row, 1821), 29.

⁹³ Moers, *Literary Women*, 93.

⁹⁴ Juliann E. Fleenor, *The Female Gothic* (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983), 27.

⁹⁵ Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 133-178.

a villainous progenitor.⁹⁶ Anne Williams postulates the distinction between the formula of Male Gothic (as exemplified in Lewis' *Monk*) and the Female Gothic, arguing for differences in plot, narrative techniques, use of horror and terror and the supernatural.⁹⁷ Diane Long Hoeveler introduces in her *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* the idea of "female power through pretended and staged weakness," which is achieved by the heroine by means of disguising as an innocent victim in an oppressive system.⁹⁸ Another issue is touched upon when Susanne Becker defines the term the Female Gothic rather in terms of the speaking subject's gender than the author's gender.⁹⁹

A distinct strand of the Female Gothic connects lesbianism to sexual discovery (as in for instance Le Fanu's *Carmilla*) which, positioning them within the context of the self and the vampiric passions, scrutinizes the national identity and female homosexuality.¹⁰⁰ Claiming that 'the Gothic' and 'queer' have some features—especially a focus on transgressive acts—in common, Paulina Palmer's *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* acknowledges the influx of queer studies which was incited especially by the context of the feminist movement. In Palmer's view, the Gothic is an appropriate means for lesbian fiction, as it is more tolerant of transgressive, non-normative and non-mainstream values.¹⁰¹

Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories are examined in Diana Wallace's "Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic" which acknowledges that the Female Gothic is not affiliated exclusively to the novel. Via the ghost story, Wallace maintains, women writers were enabled to bypass the domineering marriage plot of Radcliffian Female Gothic, presenting an uncompromising critique of "male power, violence and predatory sexuality."¹⁰² The most recent addition includes Gina Wisker's *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction* (2016), where works by Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood or Toni Morrison are studied within cultural and postcolonial

⁹⁶ Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 3-77 .

⁹⁷ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 102.

⁹⁸ Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 7-11.

⁹⁹ Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 8-10.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Gothic Literature*, 95.

¹⁰¹ Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London: Cassell, 1999), 8.

¹⁰² Diana Wallace, "Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic," abstract, *Gothic Studies* 6 (May 2004), 57-68.

frameworks. It is arguably their *Beloved* and *The Handmaid's Tale* respectively, that mark the second half of the 20th century when it comes to Gothicism.

As to the examined themes in the Female Gothic, Angela Wright claims that the 18th century Female Gothic scrutinizes interrelated notions of female desire, despair, loss and madness.¹⁰³ Indeed, female mental health proves to be a fertile ground for the Female Gothic. In fact, it was Wollstonecraft with her *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* who conceived of the mental asylum as a setting. In the light of what historians call 'the cult of true womanhood' that extolled submissiveness and piety, the 19th century society held women 'hostage' to their homes.¹⁰⁴ Explored in Gilman's important "The Yellow Wallpaper"—which only further cements Shelley's idea of the newborn as a monstrous entity—the story lets us see what the narrator does not – the extent to which her constraints are 'man-forged'. The narrator's lack of resistance towards her husband who constantly turns a blind eye to her desires and needs is rectified as she, in a silent, secret disobedience, writes her journal. The role of women in America is examined, as the narrator is—as Richard Gray puts it—"subject to the prevailing pieties about the superior wisdom of men and the necessary subordination of women, [. . .] forced into guilt or denial."¹⁰⁵ Finally, Moers adds that the themes of bravery, social position, etiquette, class security as well as the strength of sensibility, stability, integrity—even eventually self-hatred and an impulse for self-destruction—are an integral part of the Female Gothic.¹⁰⁶

It is important to note that Hoeveler, returning to the Enlightenment ideas, claims that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Mary, A Fiction* perpetuate female passivity and weakness, which ultimately does a disservice to feminism;¹⁰⁷ while in Brabon and Genz's view, Wollstonecraft's works promote female empowerment.¹⁰⁸ This direct interpretational conflict serves as a testimony to the ambiguous and conflicted essence of the Female Gothic; just as its characters are often at odds with themselves, so is the nature of the Female Gothic. Hoeveler perhaps

¹⁰³ Angela Wright, "'To live the life of hopeless recollection': Mourning and Melancholia in Female Gothic, 1780-1800," *Gothic Studies* 6 (May 2004), 19-29.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966), 151-152.

¹⁰⁵ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 317.

¹⁰⁶ Moers, *Literary Women*, 107-138.

¹⁰⁷ Diane Long Hoeveler, "The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism," *Gothic Studies* 6 (May 2004): 7; Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz, *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 145.

sums it up the best, as she claims that “until we recognize the contradictions implicit in gothic feminism [. . .] we will continue to find ourselves caught up in the self-perpetuating ideologies of the past.”¹⁰⁹

Nowadays, the Female Gothic survives in form of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* or the postmodern TV shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files* or *The Stranger Things*.¹¹⁰ Formed by various matters such as race or sexuality, The Female Gothic remains a general, highly flexible and hotly disputed category.

¹⁰⁹ Hoeverler, *Gothic Feminism*, xv.

¹¹⁰ Claire Knowles, “Feminism and the Gothic: A Brief History,” The University of Melbourne, accessed 20.4.2021, <https://library.unimelb.edu.au/exhibitions/dark-imaginings/gothicresearch/feminism-and-the-gothic-a-brief-history>.

3. Dark Vision of Oates's Short Fiction

3.1 "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

First appearing in a literary magazine *Epoch* in 1966, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is unequivocally Oates' best-known short story, frequently anthologized and presented as a part of compulsory university reading, stirring discussion up to this day. The short story spurred a relatively successful loose film adaptation *Smooth Talk* (1986).

3.1.1 Plot

The story revolves around a fifteen-year-old, self-possessed girl Connie struggling to find her place within the family. Connie, apprehensive of her abrasive mother and frequently absent, withdrawn father, takes refuge in picking up boys in local diners with her friends. It is during one of such evenings when Connie notices a peculiar boy with shaggy hair, gazing at her. Later one day, her family leaves for a barbecue, leaving Connie alone in the house. A strange, cryptically painted car pulls up on the house's driveway. It is occupied by two boys with sunglasses, with Connie recognizing one of them as the boy from before. He introduces himself as Arnold Friend and claims he came to pick her up as his date. At first, she is flattered, impressed by his musculature and honeyed words, but cautious. Upon questioning his age, Arnold's face drops, saying he is eighteen years old. Connie nevertheless notices that he is in his thirties and gets uneasy. The story grows increasingly menacing in tone, as Arnold starts to threaten her. Connie warns him that she is going to call the police, but nonetheless, Arnold persists and blackmails her. Disoriented, she runs to the telephone and hears a hollow roar from the receiver. Feeling empty, she begins to succumb to Arnold's tantalizing advances. The story concludes with Arnold successfully managing to lure his victim—as if enchanted—out of the house.

3.1.2 Analysis of Gothic Features

Various approaches have been taken on the interpretation of the story. While Joyce M. Wegs gives a persuasive account of Arnold as Satan, arguing in favor of Oates' deliberate use of the grotesque, Joan Winslow, comparing the story to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," asserts that Arnold, as a devil figure, should

be perceived as a psychological projection.¹¹¹ David K. Gratz establishes that Connie's source of fear is stemming not from her possible death, but from growing older, claiming that "it's the whole prospect of change, or growing up and getting older, which really frightens her."¹¹² Finally, Larry Rubin adopts a wholly subversive approach, claiming that "the whole terrifying episode involving Arnold Friend is itself a dream," or, as he puts it, a "daymare."¹¹³ Reminiscent of the origin of *The Castle of Otranto*, the connection of dreaming and the Gothic seems persistent.

Whichever approach the reader opts to take, it is fairly evident that Oates here gravitates toward Radcliffian terror—or even the terror 'of the soul' according to Poe—rather than Lewis' explicit portrayal of horror and repulsive imagery. In fact, on the surface level, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" does not seem to possess many explicit conventional Gothic elements at all. No immediate supernatural occurrences, ghostly apparitions nor faraway castles. Yet, the reader feels uneasy and eventually afraid, as the pace of the story gradually increases. Under closer inspection, a number of noteworthy arrangements are revealed.

Even though taking place during a bright, sunny July day, Oates skillfully manages to evoke an eerie, disturbing atmosphere. This is conducted in part via the use of the setting. The story takes place in a typical American suburban landscape which is not specified. Thus, the Gothic haunted castles, mansions or corridors are modernized and substituted by the home environment, a phenomenon typical for modern Gothic. When Arnold approaches the house and threatens Connie, the usually safe and reliable domestic space is converted into something unstable and dangerous:

I mean, anybody can break through a screen door and glass and wood and iron or anything else if he needs to, anybody at all, and specially Arnold Friend. If the place got lit up with a fire, honey, you'd come runnin' out into my arms, right into my arms an' safe at home. [. . .] This is how it is, honey: you come out and we'll drive away, have a nice ride. But if you don't come out we're gonna wait till your people come home and then they're all going to get it.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Joyce M. Wegs, "Don't You Know Who I Am?": The Grotesque in Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,' *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 5 (January 1975): 69-70; Joan Winslow, "The Stranger Within: Two Stories by Oates and Hawthorne," *Studies in Short Fiction* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1980), 263-268.

¹¹² David K. Gratz, "Oates's Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," *The Explicator* 45:3 (Spring 1987), 55.

¹¹³ Larry Rubin, "Oates's Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," *The Explicator* 42:4 (Summer 1984), 58.

¹¹⁴ Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1993), 131-132.

Thus, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” directly falls under the category of suburban Gothic, as according to Bernice M. Murphy in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*:

Horror here invariably begins at home, or at least very near to it, and in that sense the sub-genre continues the uneasy fascination with the connection between living environment and psychology which helped reinvigorate the haunted house story in the mid-twentieth century. [. . .] The child or teenager under threat is a common plot trope of the Suburban Gothic.¹¹⁵

Moreover, setting the story in the 1960s American suburbia is evocative of the American Dream. With placing all things American in the story—imagery of cans of Coke and shopping plazas—Oates captures the zeitgeist of the America in the 1960s and vividly portrays the culture of consumerism of the time: “The restaurant was shaped like a big bottle, though squatter than a real bottle, and on its cap was a revolving figure of a grinning boy holding a hamburger aloft.”¹¹⁶ Such descriptions can serve as a friendly exposition, yet Oates creates contrast which serves as a kind of premonition that the American Dream is to go terribly awry, and rather become an American Nightmare: “[Connie] look[ed] back at the darkened shopping plaza with its big empty parking lot and its signs that were faded and ghostly now. [. . .] She couldn't hear the music at this distance.”¹¹⁷

Virtually all previously mentioned interpretations agree on the significance of the role the music plays in the story. It undeniably permeates the entire work - the word ‘music’ occurs here over a dozen times, which in such a short format is an unambiguous evidence of its importance and symbolic value. Symbolism is a device that, generally speaking, the Gothic heavily exploits. Wegs claims that there is an “obvious link between Connie’s high esteem for romantic love and youthful beauty and the lyrics of scores of hit tunes.”¹¹⁸ Connie worships the music, as it is parallel to her superficial values: “music [. . .] made everything so good: the music was always in the background [. . .]; it was something to depend upon.”¹¹⁹ Emblematically, music exerted even external influence on the story, as in the 1960s, it was transitioning to the forefront of popular culture. The short story itself is dedicated to—and indirectly

¹¹⁵ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

¹¹⁶ Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” 120.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹⁸ Wegs, “‘Don’t You Know Who I Am?’,” 68.

¹¹⁹ Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” 120.

inspired by—Bob Dylan. The story is Oates' prosaic rendition of Dylan's song "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue."¹²⁰

Another symbol identified in the story are sunglasses that Arnold and his sidekick wear. Shielding from the sun is evocative of the Gothic notion of vampire, which is strengthened by Arnold's inability to enter the house: "I promise you this: I ain't coming in that house after you [. . .] honey, I'm not coming in there but you are coming out here."¹²¹ Moreover, Connie is described as two-faced, which is reminiscent of the notion of Gothic doubles as in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. This is reinforced by the description of Arnold: "his whole face was a mask."¹²² Finally, even Arnold's name 'Friend' is symbolic.

It is important to mention that Oates drew primary inspiration from the *Life* magazine story in 1966.¹²³ It dealt with the Tucson murders committed by a twenty-three-year-old serial killer Charles Schmidt, also known as 'The Pied Piper of Tucson', the nickname stemming from the description of him as intelligent, charming and popular. Oates coupled "Schmid's exploits [with] mythic legends and folk songs about 'Death and the Maiden'," which was the title of her early draft of the short story.¹²⁴

Allegedly, Schmidt was a small man wearing cowboy boots that were filled with flattened cans and newspapers to make him seem higher in stature.¹²⁵ Indeed, there are many similarities between the Pied Piper and Oates' Arnold. Oates manages to relay Arnold's charisma to the reader and Schmid's fictionalized version even keeps his grotesque, stuffed boots.

The character of Arnold is unequivocally the most prominent malicious force in the story. Instead of vengeful ghosts, we encounter a quite physical intruder, who is, nonetheless, a modern manifestation of a hostile monster. Caroline Joan S. Picart claims that "male serial murderers are typically construed as having vampiric qualities and display the primordial evil that such murderers seek to inspire, assuming the status

¹²⁰ Wegs, "Don't You Know Who I Am?," 71.

¹²¹ Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," 131.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 130.

¹²³ Joyce Carol Oates, "Joyce Carol Oates on Dylan's 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2015, accessed 23.4.2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/joyce-carol-oates-on-dylans-its-all-over-now-baby-blue-1432045329>.

¹²⁴ Johnson, *Invisible Writer*, 135.

¹²⁵ William J. Schafer, "Murder in the Desert," *Arizona Attorney* (September 2008): 29.

of a vengeful deity in relation to their victims.”¹²⁶ Just like Jeffrey Dahmer’s double Quentin P. in Oates’ *Zombie*, Arnold is a literary incarnation of Schmidt.

The story may also suggest that Arnold is a possibly supernatural phenomenon, as it looks like he belongs to the past and reappears in the present. Arnold’s car is not only painted with the most mysterious element in the story—the strange, unexplained numbers 33, 19, 17—but also a phrase that was not in vogue with the youth anymore, which is in discrepancy with the highly constructed, artificial, fashionable façade Arnold puts up for others to see:

Connie looked away from his smile to the car [. . .] And up at the front fender was an expression that was familiar—MAN THE FLYING SAUCERS. It was an expression kids had used the year before but didn't use this year.¹²⁷

This quality is typically linked to ghosts or quite literally angels of death, such as Ginzburg in Malamud’s “Idiots First.” Hawthornean and romantic in nature, such “blurring of realism and the supernatural,”¹²⁸ as Showalter calls it, is typical for Oates’ dark fiction and functions as a formal element that de-stabilizes the reader and makes them question their assumptions. Further evidence for the supernatural interpretation is presented when Arnold seems to demonstrate the ability to transcend spatiotemporal barriers:

‘Aunt Tillie’s. Right now they’re uh—they’re drinking. Sitting around,’ he said vaguely, squinting as if he were staring all the way to town and over to Aunt Tillie’s back yard. Then the vision seemed to get clear and he nodded energetically. ‘Yeah. Sitting around. There’s your sister in a blue dress, huh? And high heels, the poor sad bitch—nothing like you, sweetheart! And your mother’s helping some fat woman with the corn, they’re cleaning the corn—husking the corn’¹²⁹

What is certain, however, is that there is a connection between serial killers, popular culture and the essentially Gothic nature of the derangement of the mind, violence and murder. Mark Edmundson in his *The Nightmare on Main Street* claims that:

Gothic conventions have slipped over into ostensibly nonfictional realms. Gothic is alive not just in Stephen King’s novels [. . .], but in the media renderings of the O. J. Simpson case, in our political discourse, in modes of therapy, on TV news, on talk shows like Oprah, in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment. American

¹²⁶ Caroline Joan S. Picart, “Crime and the Gothic: Sexualizing Serial Killers,” *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 13 (March 2006): 1.

¹²⁷ Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” 127.

¹²⁸ Elaine Showalter, “Introduction: ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’,” *Celestial Timepiece*, accessed 23.4.2021, <https://celestialtimepiece.com/2016/10/09/introduction-where-are-you-going-where-have-you-been/>.

¹²⁹ Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” 129.

culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots.¹³⁰

Connie, and the short story at large, portrays disenchantment with the society, as we cannot forget that the 1960's were a time of cultural and societal upheaval. The various pressures Connie had to withstand rendered her fate inevitable.

Towards the climax of the story, Connie experiences disorientation and does not recognize her surroundings. David Punter's *A New Companion to the Gothic* perhaps sums it up the best: "In uncanny phenomena, the familiar becomes unfamiliar and then the circle is closed again as the unfamiliar reveals itself as the open secret of that with which we had felt most at home."¹³¹ When Connie screams into the phone, it is a futile gesture of pure frustration, like screaming into the void or shouting in the wind.

Even though we clearly see Connie succumbing to Arnold and stepping out of the house, there is a sense of lack of resolution, as if the story was somewhat open-ended. Though we know it probably ends in her downfall, Oates gives the reader considerable freedom with what form will it have. Since it is left unwritten, what exactly happens to Connie remains a mystery. Instead of seeing her undoing as something hideous put directly before our eyes (horror), we are unable to see it, as if it was veiled (terror).

The story possesses a clear villain, blends romance and terror and the main protagonist is in an emotional distress. An air of mystery and threat, the main prerequisite of Gothic, is fulfilled as I established many features based on the Gothic undercurrent that runs through the short story.

3.2 "The Widows"

Published in 1977, "The Widows" is a short story that Oates, in her own words, finds "absolutely haunting—mesmerizing."¹³² It was included in her early horror short story collection *Night-Side: Eighteen Tales*. In his *Danse Macabre*, a non-fiction book exploring the horror genre, Stephen King included *Night-Side* in his list of recommendations, denoting it "particularly important [to the genre]."¹³³

¹³⁰ Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadoomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), xii.

¹³¹ David Punter, *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 253.

¹³² Johnson, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates*, 349.

¹³³ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1981), 420.

Oates attempted to transform the short story—in which even Meryl Streep expressed interest—into dramatic form, though the play was never officially published, and was performed only scarcely in various modest workshop productions.¹³⁴

3.2.1 *Plot*

Set in the small city of New Hampshire, “The Widows” revolves—as the name suggests—around two women who recently lost their husbands - a 27-year-old Beatrice Kern and 29-year-old Moira Greaney. Beatrice, a former art history teacher, deals with the sudden death of her husband Wallace, who was killed in a violent automobile accident, while Moira copes with the slow death of her intellectual husband Edgar, who suffered from throat cancer. Beatrice, with her frail physical and psychological health, struggles with re-entering the society, and upon crossing paths with Moira, they become inseparable. United in their grief, they forge a strong friendship, spending time together. Spanning from late August until March, the story chronicles their lives, from declining party invitations, through shopping together, to reading poetry. Most importantly, though, the story is interlaced with the widows’ memories of their husbands and with Beatrice and Moira arguing and deliberating over various topics regarding their marriages, confiding in each other.

The story culminates when Beatrice accuses Moira of having had an affair with her husband. Moira denies these claims at first but confesses at last. Eventually, both women move to different states and proceed with their lives. On the spur of the moment, Beatrice sends Moira a note saying “Thank you, Moira” and months later, a reply “You’re welcome, Beatrice”¹³⁵ arrives.

3.2.2 *Analysis of Gothic Stories*

The overtly Gothic, nocturnal beginning sets the tone for the story: “[After having heard the phone ringing, Beatrice] found herself wandering around the passageway, distracted and vaguely expectant.”¹³⁶ The depiction of Beatrice as a helpless Gothic heroine is strengthened by her being described as having pale skin and very dark hair and eyes, whose “expression was usually dreamy, inward,

¹³⁴ Johnson, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates*, 350-357.

¹³⁵ Oates, “The Widows,” in *Night-Side: Eighteen Tales* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1977), 64.

¹³⁶ Oates, “The Widows,” 31.

contemplative, as if she were engrossed with images inside her head. [. . .] A delicate woman, hardly more than a girl,” Beatrice’s character combines vulnerability with deathliness: “She was deathly, like all widows.”¹³⁷ In fact, there is a juxtaposition between Beatrice who is black-haired, small in stature, and introverted, while Moira is blond, broad-shouldered, and hearty. Furthermore, Beatrice represents innocence, while Moira, with her infidelity, represents ‘sin’. Innocence, along with independence and identity, are important themes in the story.

Taking place in a what was once a mill town – a small fictional city called Manitock in upstate New Hampshire, the setting alternates between Beatrice’s “shabby little house”¹³⁸ and Manitock’s cemetery, to which the widows pay frequent visits. During winter, the already bleak setting of the “old gravestones [that] were battered, grey, [. . .] even encrusted in bird droppings” is complemented by descriptions of “desolate, icy streets.”¹³⁹ With setting the story within the New England region, which is in close geographical proximity to New York, Oates, metaphorically speaking, does not wander far from her homeland. Additionally, teaching, since it is both Beatrice and Oates’ occupation, could be an autobiographical element as well.

“The Widows” is dominated by highly credible dialogue, which mostly functions as an expository device that reveals information about the characters. As expected with this type of plot, enormous focus is placed on the inner lives of the characters: “She regretted nothing. She had very few emotions, no more than two or three. They narrowed, they expanded. They narrowed again,”¹⁴⁰ almost as if emotions are a separate organism that breathes and lives on its own. Passages of emotional detachment alter with intense emotional outbursts. The story is replete with interior monologue, too: “Beatrice was offended. *Went down into the grave with him.* What was the woman talking about, was she crazy? . . . But Beatrice pretended not to mind, she even laughed.”¹⁴¹ Being quite intro- and retrospective in nature, the narrative explores the nuances of the widows’ marriages and the nature of their relationships, recalling past events and fragments of their previous lives.

The past is the center of the attention, along with the notion of dealing with trauma and death. Death—pondering its nature, confronting it and coming to terms

¹³⁷ Ibid., 34-38.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 36-49.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 44.

with it—is an ever-present, central theme in the story. At first, Beatrice is frightened by Moira, and in turn, society is frightened by them, though in fact, it is rather what they represent that people fear. Additionally, in the first chapter, I established that according to Oates, truly extraordinary writing is channeled through taboo topics, among which dying and infidelity arguably belong.

After the widows become confidantes, multiple secrets are uncovered. On top of exposing Moira's infidelity, Beatrice reveals to Moira that Wallace caused a death of another young girl, when, while honking impatiently, he forced her car into a crash with a truck.

Functioning as a main source of fear, death is subtly presented in a manner that reminds the reader that it can happen to anyone, at any given time; implicative of its inevitability, the story is very potent. The reader's uneasiness and discomfort derive mainly from the discussion of the grisly details of their husband's deaths and the social effects that succeed the sudden widowing: "When people see me now, they think of disaster. The impact of one car on another, seventy miles an hour, the noise, the smashed metal, the way bodies must be ruined, so strangely, being only flesh . . ." ¹⁴² With Oates mixing realism with psychological horror, the story is filled to the brim with negative emotions such as despair, grief, but also jealousy and envy. What is especially tormenting is the harrowing anticipation preceding Edgar's approaching death. Moira, being a sardonic character, states matter-of-factly: "The preliminary months were the worst in a way, since there was some hope." ¹⁴³ Additionally, Moira had to nurse her husband, who, towards the end of his life, changed dramatically:

The man who died wasn't the same man I knew, [. . .] I don't know if I believe in a soul, a soul detachable from the body, but the personality seems to leave . . . or disappear . . . and someone else is there, left behind. About the third week before he actually died, my husband seemed to leave. ¹⁴⁴

The exploration of metaphysical and existential matters reflects Oates' background and interest in philosophy:

What did it matter?—governments, social programs, philosophical principles. They knew everything. [. . .] the world has always been mad: one crisis after another, wars and the preludes to war, treaties, peace pacts, agreements, and then war again. [. . .] 'But most of the time I don't see anything amusing in the world.' 'There isn't anything

¹⁴² Oates, "The Widows," 36.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

amusing in the world. It's in your head.' ' . . . I mean the world in itself,' Beatrice said uncertainly. ' . . . in your head. The world is. The world,' Moira said, as if imitating someone else, ' . . . is in your head. The world is your idea.'¹⁴⁵

Mainly due to her insomnia medication, Beatrice is consistently depicted as being paranoid: "What did I say? I don't remember. Were you listening in on an extension?," thinking she was mourning "because of the role she had to play—people were spying on her, demanding tears."¹⁴⁶ In the incipient stages of the story, Beatrice's psychological instability is established with her mental breakdown during which she expresses suicidal tendencies. Beatrice is consistently depicted as sickly, and the illness is never further specified and does not seem to possess clear and unambiguous physical manifestations:

Beatrice felt illness coming gradually upon her, as if from a distance [. . .] She could feel the sickness in her throat and in her bowels. [. . .] Was she, now, going to die? [. . .] [Moira:] 'No, you're not sick; you look a little pale and you've lost weight, but there's nothing wrong with you.'¹⁴⁷

Often described as an 'invisible illness', depression, still persistently dismissed and misunderstood by many even today, comes to mind. Themes of madness, hysteria and confusion hold a secure place in the story as well. Mental turmoil and intricacies of the psyche—typically Poesque themes—is the fulcrum of "The Widows." It is perhaps not coincidental that Moira's husband's name was Edgar.

With an almost machine-like precision, Oates establishes Beatrice as a character that is unworthy of trust. Her credibility is so compromised that when, towards the end of the story, she hysterically, and seemingly not righteously, accuses Moira of the betrayal, the reader's expectations are subsequently skillfully subverted.

Furthermore, the story features a plaque that was put up at the local mill as well as a poetry excerpt by William Wordsworth. Inserted into the text of the story, the plaque informs us of a death of a bride that occurred in 1854, caused by the machinery of the mill. This feature of inserted documents within the Gothic text is further explored in the following subchapter. Finally, a mention of Wordsworth is convenient, as in the story Oates seems to exploit the sublime:

She read poetry for hours and could not always judge—were such lines exquisitely beautiful, or were they terrifying? [. . .] She wanted to read these lines aloud to [. . .]

¹⁴⁵ Oates, "The Widows," 39-59.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-61.

Moira. Her voice would shake, her absurd terror would be exposed, yet she wanted to match her emotions with another person's—for how could she know, being so sick now, so weak, what was terror and what was awe? What was beauty? [. . .] It was beautiful, yes, but inhuman. [. . .] Instead she craved an art that defined limits, a human, humble, sane art, unashamed of turning away from the void, unashamed of celebrating what was human and therefore scaled-down; an art of what was possible, what must be embraced.¹⁴⁸

Undoubtedly the most psychologically realistic from the short stories selected in this thesis, “The Widows” elucidates a creeping sense of discomfort via the use of appropriate setting and characterization. The dialogues lend verisimilitude to the story and its preoccupation with the psyche of the characters, as well as specific utilization of the sublime, point toward the influence of Poe.

3.3 “Haunted”

Originating in 1987, the short story “Haunted” was first featured in the horror anthology called *The Architecture of Fear*, where Joyce Carol Oates appeared along Dean Koontz, Ramsey Campbell or Robert Aickman. In 1994, “Haunted” was featured as the opening story of Oates’ eponymous collection *Haunted: Tales of Grotesque*, presumably an homage to Poe’s *Tales of Grotesque and Arabesque*. In this collection, the influence of Oates’ predecessors is mirrored not only in “Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly” – a retelling of James’ “Turn of the Screw,” but also “The White Cat,” Oates’ rendition of Poe’s “The Black Cat.” After all, Tony Magistrale writes in his *Poe’s Children*: “The closest female descendant of Poe writing today is Joyce Carol Oates, who acknowledges her debt to Poe [. . .]. Oates frequently superimposes Poe’s plotlines consciously upon her own material.”¹⁴⁹ Indeed, the connection between Oates and Poe is perfectly evident not only from her explicit pronouncements but also from the employment of similar devices, themes and plots.

It is noteworthy that the short story collection is dedicated to Ellen Datlow, a prominent editor in the field of literature of terror. Datlow’s collaboration with Oates is apparently a long-term one, as many Datlow’s collections feature Oates’ short stories, including others in this thesis.

¹⁴⁸ Oates, “The Widows,” 57-8.

¹⁴⁹ Tony Magistrale and Sidney Poger, *Poe’s Children: Connections Between Tales of Terror and Detection* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 67.

3.3.1 Plot

The story begins with Melissa and Mary Lou, young adventurous girls and friends from the neighborhood that like to roam abandoned buildings and farms. Melissa's mother reprimands her for it, claiming it is unsafe, but Melissa is stubborn and does as she pleases. The reader gradually learns that Melissa is now actually an old widow, her children moved away and she is writing this story into a paper notebook. A series of fragmented memories ensue, ranging from the school experience featuring her substitute teacher's death, sexual experience with a boy during a Sunday excursion, or finding a dead bird. The narrative continues to leap from past to present, encompassing exploration of Melissa and Mary Lou's relationship, further exploring of the local farms, and events such as Mary Lou finding a boyfriend Hans in seventh grade.

One day, young Melissa goes alone to the Minton house, an old ruin, where she encounters an intimidating, horrible woman that violates Melissa with a willow switch, who wets herself. Melissa tells Mary Lou about it and not long after, Mary Lou goes missing, and is later found dead in the Minton house, her body unclothed and mutilated. Hans, even though pleading innocent, is arrested, but later let go. Melissa, not being admitted to the funeral, cries together with her mother. The story ends in the present, where Melissa ponders the nature of memories.

3.3.2 Analysis of Gothic Features

Packed with descriptions, events and ideas, this longer piece of work, while technically a short story, could easily be identified as a novelette. It is heavily fragmented, leaping from past to present incessantly. The story's complexity is underlined by not following a strict chronological order. In Sanford Pinsker's "Speaking about Short Fiction: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," Oates confesses to a "fascination with the phenomenon of *time*—I seem to want to tell a story as if it were sheer lyric, all its components present simultaneously."¹⁵⁰ While nowadays commonly associated with postmodernism, disjointed narrative and flashbacks affiliate to Gothic as well. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that the Gothic narrative is "likely to be discontinuous and involuted,

¹⁵⁰ Sanford Pinsker, "Speaking about Short Fiction: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in Short Fiction* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 241.

perhaps incorporating tales within tales [and] changes of narrators.”¹⁵¹ In “Haunted,” the blend of postmodernism and Gothic reaches its height when Oates deliberately features story within story, within story:

Always there were stories behind the abandoned houses and always the stories were sad. Because farmers went bankrupt and had to move away. Because someone died and the farm couldn't be kept up and nobody wanted to buy it—like the Medlock farm across the creek. Mr. Medlock died aged seventy-nine and Mrs. Medlock refused to sell the farm and lived there alone [. . .] It was said that Mrs. Medlock had gone off her head after she'd found her husband dead in one of the barns [. . .] They had to commit her to the state hospital for her own good (they said) and the house and the barns were boarded up, everywhere tall grass [. . .] and when we drove by I stared and stared narrowing my eyes so I wouldn't see someone looking out one of the windows—a face there, pale and quick—or a dark figure scrambling up the roof to hide behind the chimney—Mary Lou and I wondered was the house haunted, was the barn haunted where the old man had died, we crept around to spy [. . .] we explored the barns, we dragged the wooden cover off the well and dropped stones inside. [. . .] As I write I can hear the sound of glass breaking, I can feel glass underfoot. *Once upon a time there were two little princesses, two sisters, who did forbidden things.*¹⁵²

Oates is self-conscious of the fact that she is telling the reader a story, and purposely inserts multiple layers into the narrative. This textual self-consciousness is combined with the fact that the story seems to adopt the form of a diary: “I am writing in a dime-store notebook with lined pages and a speckled cover, a notebook of the sort we used in grade school.”¹⁵³ Committing to various methods to tell the story such as found documents, inserted scripts, as well as journals and diaries, just like *Dracula*, are very characteristic of the Gothic tradition. Additionally, the excerpt illustrates Mrs. Madlock's descent into madness. This female insanity, complemented by the persistent imagery of “strips of wallpaper torn from the walls” and “stained wallpaper hanging in shreds”¹⁵⁴ perhaps manifests thematic allusiveness to Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Furthermore, the story of “Haunted” has a distinct dreamy quality:

At an upstairs window someone was watching us—was it a man or was it a woman—someone stood there listening hard and I couldn't move feeling so slow and dreamy in the heat like a fly caught on a sticky petal that's going to fold in on itself and swallow him up. Mary Lou [. . .] was dreamy too, slow and yawning.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 9.

¹⁵² Joyce Carol Oates, “Haunted,” in *Haunted: Tales of Grotesque* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 8-11.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-17.

¹⁵⁵ Oates, “Haunted,” 15.

This is possibly related to Oates' obsession of the *Alice* books as a child, as this abnormal relation between the reality and the dreaminess, two states that are typically separate, is a recurrent phenomenon in her works.

The formulaic, fairy-tale-like beginning 'once upon a time', reappearing multiple times throughout the story, contrasts sharply with the grim ending of Melissa's mistreatment and Mary Lou's violent death. In the afterword to the collection *Haunted*, Oates ponders the nature of the grotesque, and draws a parallel between childhood fairy tales and tales of terror: "Like fairy tales, the art of the grotesque and horror renders us children again, evoking something primal in the soul."¹⁵⁶ As Oates is perfectly aware of this imaginative connection, she takes advantage of it and utilizes it in her text, impacting the reader.

I have established in the first chapter that Oates as a child was frequently roaming around the rural surroundings of her childhood home, exploring empty buildings. Due to Oates' fascination and experience with abandoned premises, it seems likely that the story was partly based on her own life. In *The Best American Essays of the Century* (2000), Oates dedicates an entire essay (titled "They All Just Went Away") to this topic, where she meditates on the essence and history of abandoned houses—the loss of value of what once was cherished—and recounts memories from her childhood, hauntingly similar to those in "Haunted." Oates claims she has not seen this type of abandoned barns elsewhere than upstate New York.¹⁵⁷ Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that, while the setting of "Haunted" is not expressly stated, it is indeed upstate New York, an area where Oates grew up.

In the essay, a handful of quite specific images occurs: unique vegetation, broken glass, a garter snake, peeling wallpaper, et cetera. Interestingly, it is precisely this grouping of images that appears in "Haunted." In other words, these detailed images closely parallel the ones in the story. In the essay, Oates even says: "This was a long time ago, yet it is more vivid to me than anything now,"¹⁵⁸ identical to the ending of "Haunted," only rephrased. Since the essay and the story share so many features, it is safe to conclude that the story is semi-autobiographical.

The story possesses possible supernatural elements, such as suspicious, mysterious circumstances surrounding their fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Harding's death:

¹⁵⁶ Oates, "Afterword," 307.

¹⁵⁷ Oates, "They All Just Went Away," 555.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 554.

A few days later the principal himself came to tell us that Mrs. Harding would not be back, she had died of a stroke. [. . .] On the school bus going home [Mary Lou] whispered in my ear, ‘That was because of us, wasn’t it!—what happened to that old bag Harding. But we won’t tell anybody.’¹⁵⁹

In particular, the final sentence of this quotation is stylized in a way suggestive of a hex or a curse. Moreover, a case of telepathy, or mind reading, seems to occur in the story: “The woman drew back half sighing half grunting. [. . .] She was smiling at me, uncovering her teeth. She could read my thoughts before I could think them.”¹⁶⁰ Telepathy, a phenomenon that emerged in the late nineteenth century, was explored by many distinguished figures including Sigmund Freud or Oscar Wilde.¹⁶¹ Within Gothic framework, this telepathic link between the woman and Melissa is comparable to the connection of Stoker’s *Dracula* and Mina.

“Haunted,” as even the name aptly suggests, is ripe with very conventional Gothic elements, from tangible items such as rotting, bloodstained mattress filled with cockroaches, through unpleasant smells, a mysterious, unidentified murmuring, to abstract concepts like a sense of paralysis and lack of control, fear, and feelings of being watched. Bad luck, omens, and forebodings are prevalent in the literature of terror, too:

Once we crawled up on the tar-paper roof over the Medlock’s kitchen [. . .] Mary Lou wanted to climb up the big roof too to the very top but I got frightened and said, No, No please don’t, [. . .] and I sounded so strange Mary Lou looked at me and didn’t tease or mock as she usually did. The roof was so steep, I’d know she would hurt herself. I could see her losing her footing and slipping, falling. I could see her astonished face and her flying hair as she fell, knowing nothing could save her.¹⁶²

With a deep, strange foreboding that Mary Lou is going to fall, Melissa deterred Mary Lou from climbing the dangerous roof.

A typically Gothic device that was used recurrently in the story is also foreshadowing, an indication that an unfortunate event is going to happen:

But Mary Lou *was* pretty, even rough and clumsy as she sometimes behaved. That long silky blond hair everybody remembered her for afterward, years afterward. . . . How, when she had to be identified, it was the long silky white-blond hair that was unmistakable. . . .¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Oates, “Haunted,” 5.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶¹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy 1870-1901*, abstract (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), accessed 31.3.2021, <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/16201/>.

¹⁶² Oates, “Haunted,” 8.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

With insinuating Mary Lou's impending death, Oates engages the interest of the reader. Finally, the bleak ending, marked by conceivably ghostly machinations is indicative of the supernatural horror:

'Hand that here, miss,' the woman said. She took the willow switch from my fingers [. . .] Her skin shone in patches, stretched tight over the big hard bones of her face. Her eyes were small, crinkling smaller, black and damp. . . . I could hear her hoarse eager breathing as it came to me from all sides like the wind. . . . I'd begun to pee even before the first swipe of the willow switch hit me on the buttocks.¹⁶⁴

To conclude, the formal devices, themes and the locations such as derelict houses, abandoned farms, decaying ruins, cemeteries, all of which are featured in the story, are all distinctly, quintessentially Gothic and are in line with the tradition.

3.4 "The Temple"

Originally published in Oates' *Demon and Other Tales* in 1996, "The Temple" has been featured in her other collections as well, namely *The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque* and *American Gothic Tales*.

3.4.1 Plot

A 50-year-old woman hears a "vexing, mysterious sound!-a faint mewing cry followed by a muffled scratching, as of something being raked by nails, or claws."¹⁶⁵ The sound even disrupting her sleep, she decides to find the source of the disturbance. After discovering that the sound issues from beneath the garden, she begins to dig strenuously. Eventually, she finds a small, battered human skull, presumably belonging to an infant. Talking gently to it, she resumes digging and manages to exhume "no more of the skeleton than a dozen or so random bones."¹⁶⁶ On an antique carmine velvet cloth, she carries the skull and bones to her bedroom, where she arranges them in the shape of a human, creating a provisory, "secret temple,"¹⁶⁷ which would not be discovered until her death long after.

¹⁶⁴ Oates, "Haunted," 20-21.

¹⁶⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, "The Temple," in *American Gothic Tales*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Plume, 1996), 346.

¹⁶⁶ Oates, "The Temple," 348.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

3.4.2 Analysis of Gothic Features

“The Temple,” having only about a thousand words, is unambiguously the shortest story from the selection. Having such a small scope, the story unfolds a fairly simple, straight-forward narrative. While the lack of names and detailed characterization implies anonymity, “The Temple” is very descriptive when it comes to surrounding details: “She dug away sinewy weeds and vines, chicory, wild mustard, tall grasses [. . .] she managed to uncover the earth, which was rich with compost, very dark, moist [. . .] chips and shards of aged brick, glass, stones were uncovered, striking the shovel.”¹⁶⁸ With mounting anticipation that was aroused by the strange noises and the resolution to find its source, Oates exploits terror. Concurrently, while the woman is shoveling, horror is prefigured: “Beetles scurried away, their shells glinting darkly in the sunshine. Earthworms squirmed, some of them cut cruelly in two.”¹⁶⁹ However, the horrific experience culminates at the climax of the story, when the skull and bones are unearthed.

How light it was! The color of parchment badly stained from the soil. She brushed bits of damp earth away, marveling at the subtle contours of the cranium. Not a hair remained. The delicate bone was cracked in several places and its texture minutely scarified, like a ceramic glaze. A few of the teeth were missing, but most appeared to be intact, though caked with dirt. The perfectly formed jaws, the slope of the cheekbones! The empty eye sockets, so round... The woman lifted the skull to stare into the sockets as if staring into mirror-eyes, eyes of an eerie transparency. A kind of knowledge passed between her and these eyes yet she did not know: was this a child’s skull?¹⁷⁰

Notably, staring into the empty eye sockets of a skull is reminiscent of *Hamlet*, a work that, with its ghosts and medieval setting, is sometimes connected to the Gothic.

It is noteworthy that “The Temple” is also strikingly similar to Francis Marion Crawford’s “The Screaming Skull” from the early 20th century. “The Screaming Skull” is a classic ghost story narrated from the point of view of an old sea captain that deals with an animated skull of unknown provenance, wreaking havoc on his life and life of others. Despite his initial skepticism, the man becomes progressively preoccupied with the skull’s supernatural origin: “Ghosts? No! You don’t call anything a ghost that you can take in your hands and look at in broad daylight . . . But it’s something that

¹⁶⁸ Oates, “The Temple,” 347.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 348.

hears and understands; there's no doubt about that."¹⁷¹ And just as the sailor in Crawford's story, the woman, too, addresses the skull and talks to it, softly: "'Yes. Yes. I'm here,' she whispered. [. . .] 'I'm here, now.' [. . .] 'I am here, I will always be here,' the woman promised. 'I will never abandon you.'"¹⁷² Evidently, the woman is speaking to it in a very motherly way. She immediately adopts the role of a mother, which exploits the notion of motherhood and even the prospect of living after death, which are distinctly Gothic tropes, according to Clive Bloom.¹⁷³ The Gothic motherhood is extensively explored, for instance, in Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*, a 1967 horror novel of immense influence.

The dead child becomes the woman's obsession. Her affection towards it is discernible: "What small, graceful fingers! How they had scratched, clawed, for release!"¹⁷⁴ Such exclamations even suggest that the child was buried involuntarily—buried alive. This concern of live burial is explored for instance in Poe's "The Premature Burial" (1844), yet another testament to the author's literary influence.

As the woman quite literally exonerated a physical remnant of the past, the interconnection between present and past could hardly be any more conspicuous. Moreover, the use of the expression 'a secret temple' lends the story a secluded, mysterious tone. With the woman's creation of the shrine, the denouement of the story evokes a sacred atmosphere. According to Sedgwick, "[Gothic characteristics] include the priesthood and monastic institutions;"¹⁷⁵ and Oates intentionally includes this Gothic feature in "The Temple." It is noteworthy that no sinister figure like Arnold in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," or the malevolent woman in "Haunted" can be identified; the baby, and thus, the climate seems to be benign, almost loving at times.

One can only wonder what motivation lies behind the woman's digging. Whether it is only due to purely pragmatic reasons, as to stop the disturbing noises, some past connection or relationship to the child, or just insanity, Oates hints that the woman knows more than it appears. As can be seen with her other stories, Oates has a

¹⁷¹ Francis Marion Crawford, "The Screaming Skull" in *Uncanny Tales* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1911), 60.

¹⁷² Oates, "The Temple," 347-348.

¹⁷³ Clive Bloom, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic* (Ilford, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 44.

¹⁷⁴ Oates, "The Temple," 348.

¹⁷⁵ Sedgwick, *The Coherence*, 9.

penchant for leaving the short story open to interpretation, consciously using the vagueness to her advantage. The child's origin, its connection to the woman—and mainly its ability to produce noises after decomposing—remains shrouded in mystery.

3.5 “Subway”

“Subway” is a short story that was included in another Ellen Datlow's anthology titled *The Dark: New Ghost Stories*, published in 2003. Presenting stories by authors such as Terry Dowling or Tanith Lee, this self-proclaimed “new ghost story anthology [. . .] filled exclusively with *scary* ghost stories”¹⁷⁶ won the International Horror Guild Award for Best Anthology of the Year.

3.5.1 Plot

On a Sunday night, Rosellen rushes from Times Square to catch a subway train. All dressed up, she encounters various people, flirting with them, musing on whether they are her ‘destiny’: a smiling man with a tongue-ring asks her out for a coffee, but Rosellen, realizing he is not the one, declines. An artificially looking girl dubbed ‘Plastic Girl’ approaches her, striking a conversation; and Rosellen wonders again. A psychiatric social worker named Dunk rudely pushes in between them, Rosellen recognizing him as a man with whom she had coffee last week; she realizes they met before “possibly on this exact train, possibly at this time of evening.”¹⁷⁷ Realizing he is not her destiny either, she says goodbye and leaves. While changing trains, she finds herself at the edge of the platform. Suddenly, she catches a glimpse of a shadow in the corner of her eye. Getting pushed, she falls on the tracks and gets killed by an approaching train.

3.5.2 Analysis of Gothic Features

In this brief, modern ghost story, the narrative distance between the narrator and the reader is minimized. The narrator, Rosellen, relays her experiences and innermost feelings, frequently even addressing the reader. “*WHO IS MY destiny? You?*”¹⁷⁸ The focus on the private, deepest feelings, often of negative nature or of an

¹⁷⁶ Ellen Datlow, “Introduction,” in *The Dark: New Ghost Stories* (New York: Tor/Tom Doherty Associates, 2003), 16.

¹⁷⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, “Subway,” in *The Dark: New Ghost Stories*, ed. Ellen Datlow (New York: Tor/Tom Doherty Associates, 2003), 145.

¹⁷⁸ Oates, “Subway,” 146.

obsession, a Gothic aspect in essence, is conveyed via complex run-on sentences and disregard for punctuation marks, indicative of stream of consciousness:

My black hair I have ratted with a steel comb to three times its natural size, my mouth that's small and hurt like a snail in its shell I have outlined in crimson, a high-gloss lipstick applied to the outside of the lips enlarging them so I'm smiling breathless making my way to the other side of the track being pushed against, collided with, rudely touched by—who?—sometimes I'm to blame, these damned high heels, catching the heel in a wad of chewed gum, absolutely disgusting, sometimes I let myself be brushed against, it's an accident, or almost an accident, some leather-jacket swarthy-skinned guy swerving toward me staring at me, this one isn't the one and yet! [. . .] Oh God I realized then yes I had met Dunk before.¹⁷⁹

These internal monologues and machinations, presented in an almost feverish manner, are managed in a way that is reflective of Rosellen's emotions; the reader is privy to nearly all her thoughts.

“Subway” is by no means a run-of-the-mill ghost story; rather, it feels more like a ghost story that is in the making. The strange encounters taking place in the subway are not supernatural nor outwardly horrifying; if anything, the encounters epitomize the tragedy of never-ending, desperate search for love, albeit in all the wrong places.

In fact, one possible interpretation of “Subway” is that Rosellen is already dead and she is experiencing a different state of being, perhaps an afterlife or a limbo. We could go further and draw from Greek mythology, suggesting that the subway train—which is always in motion, used for transporting people—is akin to Charon's boat on the Styx river – an intermezzo between life and death. In such case, Rosellen's obsession with finding her ‘destiny’ might represent true, eternal deliverance.

The preoccupation with death is salient: “In the coffee shop Dunk had told me one of his patients had threatened to kill him and he'd said what difference did it make, we are all going to die anyway aren't we.”¹⁸⁰ Such utterances mirror Oates' existentialist stance and keep to the Gothic convention at once.

“Subway” uses subtle, unsettling grotesqueness as a means of character description. For instance, the Plastic Girl is void of eyebrows and eyelashes and her skin is described as “glowing and shiny as if made of some synthetic material like flesh-plastic, without pores.”¹⁸¹ Furthermore, Rosellen notices that “it was weird how

¹⁷⁹ Oates, “Subway,” 141-145.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

[Dunk's] right eye kept drifting out of focus while his left eye had [her] pinned."¹⁸² These figures are thus established as outlandish, having idiosyncratic features. Such chance encounters with eccentric, unusual characters are evocative of the style of Coover's postmodernist short story "Charlie in the House of Rue."

The bona fide dread settles in only when the collision and death take place. This is portrayed in a graphic, horrifying way:

My body is a big boneless rag doll flopping and being crushed by the train. [. . .] My body is caught up inside the wheels, both my legs severed at the knees, my left arm torn off, my skull crushed as you'd crush a bird's egg beneath your feet, scarcely noticing you've crushed it.¹⁸³

Essentially, Rosellen reports her death and continues to report the reactions of the bystanders even after it, as if she—or her spirit—was positioned somewhere above, in a role of spectator, witnessing her own death. Moreover, it is noticeable that she does not refer to herself as 'I' but only 'my body'.

Like Arnold's sunglasses in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" or the 'mirror-eyes' of the skull's eye sockets in "The Temple," Oates places the imagery of mirrors and reflecting surfaces in "Subway" as well. Opening the story with a description highlighting that "outside the window that's a reflecting surface like a mirror mostly there are the rushing walls of the tunnel," and again concluding it with the reflection "in the grimy window,"¹⁸⁴ Oates provides the story with a circular, cyclical quality. This imagery is directly connected with the notion of the Gothic double - the Gothic duality, while usually projected directly, can be sometimes projected even indirectly via aforementioned objects such as mirrors and reflective surfaces, usually in relation with a face.

Finally, it is of the utmost importance to note the similarities between James' *Turn of the Screw* and "Subway." Both stories, while narrated in the first person, are preoccupied with spiritualism, and share psychological purposes. In *The Portrait of a Lady and the Turn of the Screw*, David Kirby contemplates the nature and depiction of James' ghostly apparitions, noting that while the traditional Gothic ghost is frightening, veil-enclosed and encumbered with chains, Jamesian ghost is innovative

¹⁸² Oates, "Subway," 144-145.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 144-147.

in its likeness to the living self.¹⁸⁵ It seems that it is this latter Jamesian type of ghost that Oates employed in “Subway,” as Rosellen’s spirit continued to exist and report on what was happening on the subway station as if she was alive.

Finally, Oates includes a short afterword following “Subway,” saying that “[her] favorite ghost story is Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, a brilliantly enigmatic and endlessly evocative tale of obsession.”¹⁸⁶ This sort of explanatory envoi reveals the intentionality of the literary and thematic traits the two stories have in common. In other words, it seems that “Subway” is a fully deliberate literary homage to James - yet another proof of not only the power Oates’ childhood Gothic influences hold, but also how inextricably fused her life and the Gothic tradition are.

3.6 “Face”

The short story “Face” appeared in a 2007 horror story collection *Inferno: New Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* edited by Ellen Datlow. Perhaps owing to its relatively recent publication, “Face” is rather unknown and has not yet been featured in any other anthology nor been subjected to any literary criticism.

3.6.1 Plot

An unnamed Old Woman, supposedly a hundred years old, lives in a decrepit house, alone. She is neglected in appearance, and has a peculiar bulge growing from the side of her neck, resembling a face. At first, it is small and lacks any features or definition. As time passes, it continues to grow in size and even forces The Woman’s head to the side. The local children spy on her and terrorize her. She frequently rummages through the trash on the streets and smells badly. The Woman is revealed to have had a husband, who, toward the end of his life, started to let himself go, became confused, grumpy and took his own life by accident while cleaning a shotgun. They had four children, too - their eleven-year-old son Calvin died of a burst appendix. The husband did not want to call for help due to money and his own pride. The three other children grew up, moved away and became distant. The focus suddenly shifts to a young 9-year-old girl and her encounter with The Woman while she was cycling. The girl is abashed and uncomfortable, but stays, stammering and staring at The Old

¹⁸⁵ David Kirby, *The Portrait of a Lady and The Turn of the Screw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1991), 72.

¹⁸⁶ Oates, “Subway,” 148.

Woman, transfixed, while The Woman asks the girl odd questions. When winter comes, The Woman dies while the lump remains mysteriously alive. Jumping 50 years forward in time, the girl, now a woman, is revealed to have dreamt of The Old Woman many times. The short story ends with her looking at the computer screen, her face reflecting, as she scratches at an itching welt on her neck.

3.6.2 *Analysis of Gothic Features*

In spite of being short in length, the short story's narrative is by no means simple. Though short stories are assumed to typically depict a sliver of life and not encompass a large span of time, "Face," with some events narrated in a flashback, once again displays Oates' penchant for writing postmodern Gothic. It is only toward the end of the story when the narration shifts in the present tense, the focus shifting as well. The explicit temporal jump of fifty years along with the flashback can be classified as instances of literary discontinuity. While "Face" is Gothically atypical in that it does not feature (classic and obvious) monsters or the supernatural, its convolution and preoccupation with time and past firmly position it within the Gothic tradition.

The character of The Old Woman is clearly afflicted by losing her husband and child: "the old man had killed himself with his own shotgun, which was a twelve-gauge double barrel [. . .]; he'd blown most of his head off with the buckshot blast."¹⁸⁷ The potency of the situation stems not only from the deliberate attention that Oates aims at death and its portrayal, but also from the fact that both the husband's and Calvin's death were preventable and therefore futile. The notion of characters grappling with past trauma, loss and pain is indicative of psychological horror.

Exposure to such horrific experiences provides an explanation for The Old Woman's derangement: "[the children] could hear the old woman speaking to herself in a language they couldn't comprehend; maybe it was no language at all only just rapid muttered sounds punctuated by laughter."¹⁸⁸ It is an instance of ambiguity as well – the fact that the children do not recognize the language might just imply that The Woman speaks another existing and perfectly normal language, but it might as well signalize a supernatural ability just like in Blatty's *The Exorcist*. Moreover, it is

¹⁸⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, "Face," in *Inferno: New Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*, ed. Ellen Datlow (New York: Tor/Tom Doherty Associates, 2007), 177.

¹⁸⁸ Oates, "Face," 178.

obvious that The Old Woman, since she lived for a long time, lost track of time, as upon the encounter with the young girl, The Woman mistakes her for the girl's mother. This air of agelessness provides her with an almost witch-like quality. Finally, The Woman asking the girl odd questions—while suggestive of senility—implies the inevitability of old age.

It is obvious that The Old Woman and her welt serve as the main source of fear in the short story. Not only does she encompass mental unhingement, but also corporeal aberration reminiscent of *Frankenstein*. Thus, she suffers from visible as well as invisible deformity. Evoking fear as well as pity, the short story blurs the line as to who is the victim; the conflation of the villain and the victim takes place.

Like Arnold's legs in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," The Old Woman is portrayed as physically crooked; she is moving in a 'crab-scuttling' way. This overt grotesqueness is complemented by the rather horrific, disgusting details such as worm-like veins in the eyes, lice and acrid stench:

[. . .] it was said that the county coroner found part of a tortoise-shell comb grown into her scalp inside the matted gummy gray hair and that her scalp was reddened and swollen with hundreds of insect bites and that her shriveled and wasted body was covered in insect bites beneath a patina of grime.¹⁸⁹

Moreover, the descriptions of "a thing growing out of her neck, swollen like a goiter"¹⁹⁰ causes the reader to feel as if witnessing a freak show - a popular socio-cultural phenomenon that, as Sara Martín points out in her "Freaks: Strategies for the Textual Representation of the Uncommon Other," "was a product of mid-Victorian America which survived until the end of World War II."¹⁹¹ The Old Woman, a hapless wanderer, is like a curiosity to gawk at; just like staring at a gruesome car accident while passing by, one cannot tear their gaze away.

Furthermore, the Gothic mode encompasses a concept of the Gothic 'Other'. The Gothic Other defies the classification of human, he is the opposite of normative; he is inhumane, irregular and foreign, akin to any monster.¹⁹² In "Face," The Old Woman, deviating from the norm, can be said to be a representation thereof. While the

¹⁸⁹ Oates, "Face," 179.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 176.

¹⁹¹ Sara Martín, "Freaks: Strategies for the Textual Representation of the Uncommon Other," 2005, 1, accessed 26.3.2021, https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/worpaper/2005/113498/frestrex_a2005p1iENG.pdf.

¹⁹² Ruth B. Anolik, ed., *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in Gothic Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010), 2.

concept of the Other is a conventional Gothic construction dating as back as the early 19th century,¹⁹³ the freak as a form of a human monster or this Gothic Other is relatively recent.

It was Leslie Fiedler who acknowledged this modernized version of the monster in his 1978 *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, labeling it as a new phenomenon. The old formulations of monstrosity of Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, William Beckford and Clara Reeve did not mention any abnormality of physiology, focusing instead on evoking fear via superstition of the Middle Ages. Indeed, only with Shelley's *Frankenstein* did this recent type of freak find its way into literature. The creation of Shelley's monster was enabled not only by the latest technology, but also by the promotion of the idea of the human monstrosity by the Enlightenment ideologies.¹⁹⁴ Incorporating a 'freak' character into the narrative is particularly embraced by the Southern Gothic, as in for instance Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People." It is important to note, though, that Oates is not a Southern writer, does not typically set her works in the American South, and while O'Connor utilizes irony and comic relief, Oates does not.

In fact, the setting of the story, while unspecified, is marked by the idyllic descriptions of corn fields and cider mills as well as decaying buildings: "the straggly lilac [. . .] grew wild amid the ruins of the old cider mill," The Woman's house "a falling-down unpainted farmhouse."¹⁹⁵ It is probable that this short story's rural setting was also inspired by Oates' upbringing.

Last but not least, the final sequence with its increased use of commas and semicolons elucidates immediacy, even oppression:

The girl never told anyone about the day the old woman had stopped her in the lane, but for a long time she dreamt of the old woman, her nostrils pinched with the stink, compulsively she touched her hair dreading to feel that it had become matted and gummy; she had only to shut her eyes to see the face pushing out beside the old woman's face, the tiny unblinking eyes, and now, nearly fifty years later and hundreds of miles from her childhood home, she finds herself unconsciously stroking her neck, seeing in the glassy surface of the computer screen at which she is working, when dusk enters the room and she hasn't yet switched on a light, the face reflected there; it is not a face she knows except it is her face, and her fingernails scratch at the itchy skin, the

¹⁹³ Ruth B. Anolik, "Introduction: The Dark Unknown," in *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2004), 1-2.

¹⁹⁴ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 262-263.

¹⁹⁵ Oates, "Face," 176.

flaming welt, this sinewy growth on her neck, at the very base of her neck at her shoulder bone, hidden by her collar, throbbing with furious heat.¹⁹⁶

This extremely long concatenation of words, formally perhaps just one sentence, is akin to the literary technique of stream of consciousness. The function of commas and semicolons here is to generate expectancy and anticipation; a signal to the reader that there is more to come. The story's resolution piques the reader's interest as well. Interestingly, the monitor serves as a reflective surface within the Gothic doubling tradition as introduced in the previous subchapter. It can be understood as something innocuous, as the 'flaming welt' could simply be a bruise or a rash, yet it can also be the inception of the new head, signifying that the woman will suffer the same fate. The employment of ambiguity, as well as an air of decadence and degeneration, spiritual or physical, overlays the whole short story.

3.7 “Big Momma”

“Big Momma,” the most recent short story from the selection, was published in 2016 in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, which publishes mainly mystery and crime short stories. Reprinted in Oates' *The Doll-Master and Other Tales of Terror*, “Big Momma” managed to win the 2017 Thriller Award for best short story.¹⁹⁷

3.7.1 Plot

“Big Momma” focuses on Violet Prentiss, a 13-year-old self-conscious, lonely girl. The story opens with her having an argument with her mother who reprimands her for having used a too daring lipstick to the mall. The reader learns that in the area, abductions of children and animals are taking place - the perpetrators are suspected by the police to be out-of-state truckers, driving usually along Ajax Boulevard. Being a transfer student at South Valley Middle School, Violet struggles with finding friends, until a schoolmate Rita Mae Clovis hollers at her from a black SUV “with mud-splattered fenders and scraped sides, that looked as if it had been in use for some time,”¹⁹⁸ inviting her for a ride. Rita Mae introduces Violet to the Clovis family, which is very amiable and welcoming. Since then, Violet begins to occasionally visit their

¹⁹⁶ Oates, “Face,” 179.

¹⁹⁷ “Past Nominees and Winners,” International Thriller Writers, accessed 10.4.2021, <https://thrillerwriters.org/programs/award-nominees-and-winners/>.

¹⁹⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, “Big Momma,” *Celestial Timepiece*, accessed 10.4.2021, <https://celestialtimepiece.com/2016/06/05/big-momma/>.

house. She progressively spends more and more time there, staying over for dinners, receiving an abundance of attention and compliments, especially from particularly friendly Mr. Clovis. Eventually, Violet spends all her free time at the Clovis', only sleeping at her mother's house, which is frequently vacant anyway, as her mother allegedly works long hours. One day, Mr. Clovis offers Violet to meet 'Big Momma', a special pet they keep in the back room that turns out to be an enormous python, which seems to have devoured something rather large recently. Violet feels scared but excited. Some time after, she finds herself at Ajax Boulevard, and, upon insisting, reluctantly enters the black SUV once again. After driving back to their house, Mr. Clovis puts an unknown substance—possibly a drug—to her drink. Feeling drowsy, Violet is led directly inside the Big Momma's enclosure, where she falls asleep on the floor as the snake approaches.

3.7.2 *Analysis of Gothic Features*

In the very beginning of the short story, Oates discreetly hints at domestic violence: "*It's after six. So what. Violet made a pinched little face, luckily her mother didn't see or she'd have gotten a sharp slap.*"¹⁹⁹ Violet's name could be seen as emblematic, as it bears a slight resemblance to the word 'violence'.

It is evident in the story that Violet's relationship to her mother is disrupted, the Clovis family functioning as a substitute family. Violet's strained relationship with her mother is clearly one of the sources of her emotional distress:

Violet slammed the door to her room. Her heart was beating crazy-hard. Her lips felt swollen as if in fact her mother had slapped her. 'Hate hate hate you. Wish I was dead.' Thinking, then—'*Wish you were dead.*'²⁰⁰

Similarly to "The Widows," the female protagonist, in an overwhelmingly emotional, distressed state, wishes for death.

Moreover, directly on the first page, the mother questions Violet: "Did someone give you a ride? Who? How'd you get back? Where've you been?" The last sentence could very well serve as an allusion to Oates' story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," with which "Big Momma" shares numerous characteristics, namely the general pattern of an adolescent located in a suburb with problematic

¹⁹⁹ Oates, "Big Momma."

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

relationships, or a description of a character moving in a peculiar way, like Arnold Friend (or even The Woman in “Face”). When Violet encounters the members of the Clovis family, she notices a strange feature about the eldest Clovis son: “from the waist up Emile was normal-seeming but when he was on his feet you could see that his legs were strangely short” and that “when Emile walked quickly he seemed to scuttle like a crab as if one leg was slightly shorter than the other.”²⁰¹ Through the character of Emile, Oates once again uses images of unusual bodily motion, which functions as a grotesque element.

What, however, highlights the similarity between “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” and “Big Momma” the most, is the figure of an absent parent. Violet’s mother, coming from questionable social milieu, often comes home late and even under influence. In fact, the reason behind moving houses was that Violet’s mother would “*reinvent herself and begin again*,”²⁰² which is suggestive of a tumultuous past. Portrayed as belonging to a lower stratum of society, the Gothic preoccupation with class is conveyed.

She often scolds and questions Violet: “Violet! I’m asking you a question. [. . .] The way you’re behaving lately around here, somebody’s going to take you.”²⁰³ This constant disciplining only further alienates Violet from her. Nevertheless, the disciplining, if a bit heavy-handed, does signify that she cares for her; further evidence is presented when the mother prepares Violet’s favorite meal and expresses love to her even explicitly. Their damaged relationship thus stems not from pure hate, but from considerable misinterpretation, which merely underlines the tragedy of the story. Not dissimilar to O’Connor or Salinger, Oates has a strong preoccupation with familial relationships and the complex anxieties that stem from them.

As hinted at in the analysis of “The Temple,” it is important to mention that the Gothic tradition encompasses the concept of the ‘Gothic mother’. According to Ruth Bienstock Anolik, “the typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected.”²⁰⁴ This is holding true not only for Violet’s consistently physically absent mother, but also for Rita Mae’s mother, who is absent from her life altogether, as she is said to have abandoned her during childhood. Oates explores the theme of maternal

²⁰¹ Oates, “Big Momma.”

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ruth Bienstock Anolik, “The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode,” *Modern Language Studies* 33, no. 1/2 (Spring – Autumn, 2003): 25.

estrangement as Violet, innocently striving for affection and intimacy, prefers the accompaniment of the Clovis family. Irving Malin connects this type of sinful family, which he dubs “the monstrous family,”²⁰⁵ with the New American Gothic.

The story has a distinctive air of danger and threat, which Oates systematically builds: “Don’t you know that the mall is *dangerous*? Hanging out there is *dangerous*? [. . .] *Do not walk anywhere after dark alone—or even with a friend.*”²⁰⁶ The terrible abductions function as an invasion of domestic space: “There’ve been children ‘abducted’ here—a two-year-old toddler taken right out of a backyard, with her mother just inside a screen door on a telephone.”²⁰⁷ The primary impulse is to identify the unknown, out-of-state abductors as the main threat, though, as the story progresses, the reader gains a growing suspicion towards the Clovis’ family, until it is undeniable that they are the evildoers. It is important to clarify that the snake itself cannot be considered evil, as it is only a vessel. The true evil lies within the family and the manipulation it skillfully exercises.

It is noteworthy that Oates provides us with a few hints, particularly when Emile is seen by Violet to exit the SUV with “a canvas bundle in his arms, that was bulky and awkward-sized, and looked almost as if it was moving, but later when Emile came into the kitchen he didn’t have the bundle.”²⁰⁸ Through this event, Oates instills curiosity and a sneaking suspicion in the reader. It is very possible that Emile was carrying a small animal—or was it a small child?—to the snake enclosure. The contents of the bundle are never determined, and the secret is left undisclosed. Furthermore, it is revealed that it was Emile of the Clovis family who came forward to the police as an eyewitness, claiming that the abductors were out-of-state truckers. A device of foreshadowing is used when Violet inquires about the rabbits’ origin, after which Mr. Clovis reveals that he gets them from Ajax Boulevard, the street where the abductions allegedly take place.

Once again, ambiguity is methodically utilized throughout the story. It is most apparent in the Clovis family’s remarks when Violet is brought to see Big Momma for the first time:

²⁰⁵ Irving Malin, *New American Gothic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 65.

²⁰⁶ Oates, “Big Momma.”

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

‘Big Momma sleeps a lot, you’d think. But see, she isn’t actually *sleeping*. She’s *watching*.’ ‘Big Momma doesn’t have teeth like we do, to grind up food. She swallows her food whole.’ ‘She catches her food in her coils and squeezes it so it’s paralyzed but she doesn’t care for dead food. She likes *live*.’ ‘Her mouth stretches open, sort of unhinges, you wouldn’t believe how wide, so she can swallow her food . . . It’s awesome.’ ‘It only looks like she’s sleeping. But if you were to go inside, she’d *wake up fast*.’ The Clovises laughed. The prospect of venturing inside the glass enclosure made Violet feel panicked.²⁰⁹

Such statements, along with the repeated evocation of mind-reading, either in the beginning: “But how could her mother even guess that Violet hadn’t been telling the truth? Could her mother *read her mind*?” or towards the end: “During the meal Mr. Clovis regarded all of the faces around the table with a playful sort of scrutiny as if he had the power to read minds”²¹⁰ serve as a distinctly ominous device inciting terror. To this possible supernatural element is added the Gothic feature of secret, a family secret in particular, as the giant python is kept hidden from the outside world: “Out of his pocket Mr. Clovis took a key to unlock an unusually heavy door, that looked as if it were reinforced with steel.”²¹¹ In a sense, Violet wanders around her own nightmare world, moving from the world of isolation and invisibility she encounters at home and at school to the world of secrecy, being used for someone else’s benefit, and eventual death.

The setting alternates between the apartment—denoted “too depressing” with its resemblance to “a two-storey motel of stucco painted dull orange” and its “parking lot with laser-lights that bored through the venetian blinds in her room and kept Violet awake at night”—and a remote setting of “what Mr. Clovis called a ‘rural retreat’ [. . .] a sprawling old farmhouse at the edge of town, in an open field that had once been [. . .] a pasture.”²¹² The setting of Clovis’ residence is truly rural, with the descriptions of near “decaying outbuildings-hay barn, storage barn, chicken coop, silo [and] the remains of a decaying apple orchard and [. . .] a straggling forest of deciduous trees.”²¹³ Its remoteness is highlighted by the fact that “the nearest neighboring house wasn’t even visible—‘Lots of privacy for my brood,’ Mr. Clovis said, with a wink.”²¹⁴ The motif of a deteriorating apple orchard is recurrent in Oates’ fiction, highlighting the Gothic tenor. Finally, when Violet is introduced to their house, she notes it is “dirty

²⁰⁹ Oates, “Big Momma.”

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

with dust balls on the floors, cobwebs everywhere, and the husks of dead insects underfoot, and a pervasive smell of grime,” noticing even “remains of rabbits in [the outside cages],”²¹⁵ no doubt used for feeding Big Momma.

Furthermore, in *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art*, Linda Bayer-Berenbaum notes that “modern Gothic novels [. . .] maintain extreme contrast.”²¹⁶ Assuming its pertinence to short stories as well, “Big Momma” offers one such contrast. In an obviously man-made dwelling, in a secret back room containing a glassed contraption with a lever, the picture of the enormous serpent stands out—the image of the natural in an unnatural environment. Additionally, in the enclosure’s vicinity, an axe, newspaper with blood stains and other overtly Gothic horror paraphernalia is placed.

The presence of specific imagery once again serves as evidence that Oates deals with the distinctly American way of life: “Mr. Clovis brought hefty bags from McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, Wendy’s, Dunkin’ Donuts to slide onto the kitchen table with a grin.”²¹⁷ Oates bases her Gothic works in decidedly ordinary American lives and culture.

“Big Momma,” being of novelette length, is driven mostly by dialogue, which, in contrast to “The Widows,” propels the plot. Ripe with interior monologue as well, “Big Momma” illustrates psychological complexity, which opens the way to effective psychological horror. Tanya Tromble states in her “Joyce Carol Oates: Fantastic, New Gothic, and Inner Realities” that “evoking the interior entropy [is] characteristic of the new gothic,”²¹⁸ and such can be found in the character of Violet. Desperate for acceptance, her feelings of isolation drive her in the face of adversity and possible death by devourment. As is typical for Oates, the story ends in a vague vein, providing the reader with freedom to decipher the ending. One thing being certain, the story’s conclusion is marked with Violet falling asleep, descending into a dreamy realm—the ceasing or loss of consciousness taking place.

²¹⁵ Oates, “Big Momma.”

²¹⁶ Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 22.

²¹⁷ Oates, “Big Momma.”

²¹⁸ Tanya Tromble, “Joyce Carol Oates: Fantastic, New Gothic, and Inner Realities,” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 62 (Spring 2014): 4, accessed 11.4.2021, <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1433#ftn>.

4. Hide and Seek: The Female Condition in Selected Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oates

It was mentioned in the first chapter that Oates identifies as a feminist sympathizer. However, upon further research, it became increasingly obvious that Oates' relationship with this ideology cannot be presented in such short, simplistic terms and should be looked at in greater detail.

In a *New York Times* article from 1982, Oates states that she recognizes her life as a 'feminist story'; however, she further asserts that her "feminism isn't radical, or cannot at any rate automatically define the masculine as an enemy."²¹⁹ Five years later, Bender argues for the implicit feminist nature of Oates' *Do With Me What You Will* and *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, claiming that Oates "continues to share central feminist concerns. Even in her earliest fiction and critical essays, she attacked what she viewed as perversely masculine ideals."²²⁰ Indeed, Oates appears to acknowledge the patriarchal structure of society, as in her *The Faith of a Writer*, she recognizes that "it is a man's world."²²¹ In *Conversations*, Milazzo unambiguously designates Oates as a feminist, while on the other hand, he specifies that she is not "a doctrinaire feminist, she is a writer first of all, whose sex is neither an issue nor a weapon."²²² Disapproving of the term 'woman writer', Oates believes that an existing, thinking, but most importantly writing woman is violating some unwritten, tacit rule.²²³ At times, Oates even seems inclined to distance herself from the movement:

Where once I was sympathetic with 'feminism' I find it all very tiresome now [. . .]. What has happened to the freshness of the Movement. . . . Two or three or four 'ideas' expressed again and again in different form.²²⁴

Furthermore, Joanne V. Creighton in "Unliberated Women in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction" asserts that, by and large, Oates is not considered a feminist writer, nor does

²¹⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, "Stories That Define Me," *The New York Times*, July 11, 1982, accessed 22.4.2021, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/05/specials/oates-define.html>.

²²⁰ Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates*, x-130.

²²¹ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 27.

²²² Milazzo, *Conversations*, 37-149.

²²³ Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?," *The New York Times*, March 29, 1981, accessed 22.4.2021, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/05/specials/oates-violent.html>.

²²⁴ Johnson, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates*, 187.

she introduce heroines who are capable of expressing their distress,²²⁵ which is somewhat contradictory to Oates' own statement that "a woman should acknowledge her hurt, her anger and her hope of 'justice'; even a hope for revenge might be a good thing, in her work if not in her life."²²⁶ What is evident from the presented data is that Oates' relationship with feminism is rather turbulent. Her stance on the ideology should not be understood in binary terms; instead, it should be considered as unstable and positioned within a spectrum.

Interestingly, there is a subgenre of Gothic terror fiction called 'contes cruels'. Being listed as its proponent along with Angela Carter, Oates is credited with having re-invigorated contes cruels in late 20th century with her Female Gothic works that underline society's ill-treatment of women. According to Snodgrass, this subgenre exploits the prospect of "pain, extremes of mental and physical suffering, and the dread of death that accompanied the nadir of Gothicism."²²⁷ Indeed, depictions of deep anguish, violence and existential despair sit comfortably with Oates' style. Wondering about the roots of this odd obsession, Tony Magistrale, for instance, draws a parallel between Oates' obsession with incest, abuse and violence inflicted on women and the analogous matters discussed in Poe's fiction.²²⁸

Naturally, Oates has been questioned about her absorption with violence countless times; and it has had a rather disheartening effect on her. In a *New York Times* article published in 1981, Oates discloses her dissatisfaction with the implication the ever-appearing question hints at:

Since it is commonly understood that serious writers, as distinct from entertainers or propagandists, take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its good, it is always an insulting question; and it is always sexist. The serious writer, after all, bears witness. The serious writer restructures 'reality' in the service of his or her art, and surely hopes for a unique esthetic vision and some felicity of language; but reality is always the foundation just as the alphabet, in whatever motley splendor, is the foundation of 'Finnegans Wake.'²²⁹

It is no wonder that Oates, figuratively speaking, recoils every time she is asked why her works contain so much violence, as it is neither a male nor a female subject. It is,

²²⁵ Joanne V. Creighton, "Unliberated Women in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 17, no. 1 (April 1978): 165.

²²⁶ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 27.

²²⁷ Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, 80.

²²⁸ Magistrale, *Poe's Children*, 69.

²²⁹ Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?."

unfortunately, a reality of everyday life, and, as Oates suggests, it should be presented as such, notwithstanding the author's gender.

Oates appears to even have garnered moderate criticism for her continuing preoccupation with violence governing her works.²³⁰ It is notable that when, for instance, Tim O'Brien portrays macabre corpses in his fiction, it is generally perceived differently than when Oates does so. The motivation to write about such experiences is questioned only with the latter. With some critics and audience, it seems, the scrutinizing of the motives is dependent on the author's gender. Fortunately, Oates tries valiantly not to consider such comments as serious criticism and defends herself with the claim that "the relationship between physical and psychological violence is one fairly generally explored, isn't it? I know I have been exploring it since my first published stories."²³¹ Oates pays no heed to the pressures that beset her as a female writer. Staying true to the essence of literary mimesis, she chooses to candidly portray life's darker, more violent sides, while simultaneously enriching the work with the aspect of female experience.

Assigned with labels such as "a feminist classic"²³² or "an early and influential example of [contemporary American Female Gothic],"²³³ Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" has been much debated - read as a feminist work by some, and anti-feminist by others. It is notable that feminist approach falls on fertile ground with "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," as the story's ambiguity as well as the narrative of a young innocent female threatened by a good-looking but cruel, malevolent villain, holds potential for various interpretations. Written and set in the 1960s—a transformative, revolutionary era—the story is contextually tied to re-defining society's exercises and conceptions. Situating the story within the context of "human beings struggling heroically to define personal identity in the face of death itself,"²³⁴ Oates articulates the ethos of the 1960's society.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" features a Radcliffian heroine that is prototypically imaginative and romantic. Connie's daydreaming about

²³⁰ Milazzo, *Conversations*, xiii.; Oates, "Stories That Define Me."

²³¹ Milazzo, *Conversations*, 138.

²³² Elaine Showalter, ed., *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994), back cover.

²³³ Jerrold E. Hogle and Jessica Bomarito, *Gothic Literature: A Gale Critical Companion* (Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2006), 216.

²³⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, "Preface," in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Stories of Young America* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1974), 10

love familiarizes the reader with her naïve, adolescent fantasy, filled with excessive focus on male attention and superficiality of looks. It is shown when Arnold's car pulls up on the driveway, and Connie's first, instinctive thoughts concern her appearance and whether she looks attractive; or rather, whether the uninvited visitor will find her attractive. This particular instance shows how girls and women have been conditioned to cater to the male gaze.

The traditional role of villain is occupied by an extremely threatening, hubristic character of Arnold. This villainous figure serves as a source of ambiguity, as Connie is thrown in a quandary, simultaneously drawn to him and frightened of him. He is an offender who engages in a process to abuse and exploit Connie, his charisma accentuated by the advances he makes. As I established in the third chapter, this male character is undoubtedly the main source of fear. It is worth noting that a recent study "On the Nature of Creepiness" conducted by F. T. McAndrew unequivocally concluded that "males are more likely to be creepy than females."²³⁵ This 'creepiness' is highlighted by the more than twenty-year age gap between Connie and the men:

She could see then that he wasn't a kid, he was much older—thirty, maybe more. [. . .] Ellie turned for the first time and Connie saw with shock that he wasn't a kid either—he had a fair, hairless face, cheeks reddened slightly as if the veins grew too close to the surface of his skin, the face of a forty-year-old baby.²³⁶

The story portrays exploitation of a younger girl who does not yet have the means to see through the older, more mature male's advances. Not yet firmly settled in her sexuality, Connie's feelings initially oscillate between attraction and fear. Arnold is the embodiment of sexual victimization of young, inexperienced girls - in this case Connie. It is Oates herself that adds: "sexual abuse seems to us the most repellent kind of abuse."²³⁷ Some of Arnold's threats are overtly sexual in nature:

I'm always nice at first, the first time. I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try to get away or pretend anything because you'll know you can't. And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give in to me and you'll love me—²³⁸

Obedience and submissiveness are presented when Connie gives up and places herself at Arnold's mercy (or possibly lack thereof). The story can be understood as the

²³⁵ F. T. McAndrew and Sara S. Koehnke, "On the Nature of Creepiness," *New Ideas in Psychology* 43 (March 2016), 12.

²³⁶ Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," 128.

²³⁷ Oates, *The Faith of a Writer*, 34.

²³⁸ Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," 130.

epitome of male oppression and their instinctual impulse to get their way, often starting by appealing to the girl's weaknesses, and, when that fails, resorting to foul, aggressive means.

Finally, a transformation of the feminized domestic space takes place: "The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but that wasn't good enough, wasn't going to help her."²³⁹ In a sense, the kitchen is a symbol of Connie's femininity, and in this case, the story suggests that it did not help her, quite on the contrary.

This particular setting is paralleled in the beginning of "The Widows" with Beatrice, where the kitchen is described as "*her* space."²⁴⁰ After her husband's death, Beatrice's kitchen, even the whole house becomes a haven, a place of refuge for her:

Unable to sleep, she had wandered downstairs, barefoot, thinking that she would sit in the kitchen for the rest of the night. She would be quite safe there. Walls painted a very light yellow, a refrigerator that hummed and rattled, linoleum tile of orange and brown. Warm colors. At her usual place, her feet primly up on the chair, arms around her knees.²⁴¹

Interestingly, there seems to be a connection between "The Widows" and "The Yellow Wallpaper," as—aside from the color of the wall—the stories share a preoccupation with women's inner turmoil and mental health. Beatrice's house serves as a hiding spot from the ever-present, judgmental eyes of the small town: "of course people talked about one another constantly. And they were saying that Beatrice was not looking well; that she had resigned her teaching job; someone had even said she was—"²⁴² The reader is only left to speculate about the people's gossips and conclusions. With their husbands' death, Beatrice and Moira are constantly worrying about how people see them. The women are invariably trying to please people and to adhere to societal expectations and pressures. In other words, even in times of great trouble and mourning, the women are deeply concerned about their public image:

An intensity of interest in other people, an exaggerated respect for whatever they said or did, had characterized [Moira] almost since childhood. [. . .] *How pretty Moira is!* people sometimes said, as if surprised. Seeing her at close range, they were often surprised. *How pretty your wife is!* people had told her husband, meaning to flatter him. [. . .] She was taller than her husband, a golden-glowing girl with a daughterly manner, both robust and shy. It had been years since she had played on girls' hockey

²³⁹ Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," 131.

²⁴⁰ Oates, "The Widows," 30.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

and basketball teams, yet her husband often alluded to her skill at sports; he complimented her, embarrassed her, as if to explain to her—however obliquely—why she was not maternal and should not take that risk.²⁴³

The excerpt above contributes to the interpretation of “The Widows” as a critique of the patriarchal system as well as degradation of women by means of referring to them only as a sort of extension of a man; the woman and her autonomous identity is marginalized. It is important to note that Moira’s husband Edgar is of high social status and is well-respected in the community. In addition to losing a companion, Moira has to deal with a loss regarding her social position as well. Moira is portrayed as an extremely dependent character: “I was his child. I wasn’t his daughter, necessarily, but I was his child.”²⁴⁴ This infant-like relationship is, however, reversed, when at his deathbed, Moira is required to nurse him. The sense of loss is temporarily mitigated, though, as Moira acknowledges her husband’s negative quality: “He always underestimated me because he didn’t know how to value women.”²⁴⁵ While supporting female empowerment via statements like this, Oates does not blindly defend her stance, which is in accordance with her moderation regarding feminism. She does not hesitate to present a critique of some women who, unfortunately, unknowingly perpetuate the objectification of women, too:

Especially, she had come to dislike the ritual remarks women made to one another, even in the presence of men—always complimenting one another on their clothes, their hair, their physical appearance. They did not know how insulting such remarks were to her, as if she were to be continually assessed from the outside, as an aesthetic phenomenon; they did not sense how, unconsciously, they were setting one another up for the routine, perfunctory admiration of men, which was always slightly contemptuous.²⁴⁶

It seems Oates is very much conscious of the feminist undertone she writes in: “The two of them could go out together, Moira laughed, so men could approach them both, openly. . . . ‘And then what?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Then we could explain how we don’t need them,’ Moira said.”²⁴⁷ Evidently, Oates advocates for the recognition of a woman as a separate, detached, independent entity – an effort of emancipation.

A sense of female camaraderie among Beatrice and Moira is fostered: “they would be united involuntarily by their tears—like young girls, like children, like

²⁴³ Oates, “The Widows,” 40-41.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

sisters.”²⁴⁸ In the face of adversity, even in spite of their strife, the understanding, the unity of sisterhood is what ultimately sets their souls at ease.

The examination of the female bond is paralleled in “Haunted.” Frequently calling each other ‘sister’—though not being related—the notion of sisterhood and kinship is established between Melissa and Mary Lou, prepubescent tomboys reminiscent of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* Topsy.

Aside from the presented opposition of pretty and ugly sister, the aspect of polarity is reflected in the dual nature of society’s relationship towards women. On one hand, Melissa’s teacher always tells her that since more is expected from her, the more disappointed she is; yet, simultaneously, constant underestimation takes place when the principal talks down to them in a very childish, belittling way.

Crucially, the relationship between Melissa and Mary Lou seems more than friendly, as Melissa frequently comments: “[Mary Lou’s hair] was very beautiful—silky and shimmering. I dreamt of [it] sometimes, but the dreams were confused,” or “I hated her sometimes but then I’d forgive her as soon as she smiled at me.”²⁴⁹ Moreover, descriptions of Melissa’s feelings are frequently suggestive of vibrant sexual excitement:

Mary Lou caught my eye and winked and I sat there at my desk feeling the strangest sensation, something flowing into the top of my head, honey-rich and warm making its way down my spine. [. . .] my thoughts were somewhere else leaping wild and crazy somewhere else and I knew Mary Lou’s were too.²⁵⁰

Bold, argumentative, and disliked by Melissa’s mother (possibly because she suspects their relationship is getting ‘out of hand’, as she explicitly dislikes when they spend time alone at their house), Mary Lou embodies the rejection of authorities. The girls often go trespassing, in search for a Gothic adventure.

Mary Lou said: ‘You know what—I’d like to burn this place down.’ And she looked at me and said, ‘You think I wouldn’t do it?—just give me a match.’ And I said, ‘You know I don’t have any match.’ And a look passed between us. And I felt something flooding at the top of my head, my throat tickled as if I didn’t know would I laugh or cry and I said, ‘You’re crazy—’ and Mary Lou said with a sneering little laugh, ‘*You’re* crazy, dumbbell—I was just testing you.’²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Oates, “The Widows,” 46.

²⁴⁹ Oates, “Haunted,” 9-10.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

The excerpt above feels more like a clumsy flirtatious provocation than premeditation of arson. The girls are at the onset of their sexuality, intensively curious. We argue that “Haunted” belongs to what Paulina Palmer calls ‘lesbian Gothic’, the story portraying female homosexual romance. The Minton farm, with the haunting woman inside, embodies the unconventional lesbian desire: “Yeah—this house *is* special. [. . .] It was the place we liked best. [. . .] The house was beautiful inside if you had the right eyes to see it.”²⁵² It is possible that the terrible, imposing woman is a fragmented part of Melissa; the lesbian side of her ‘self’. This is not only supported by the fact that the “persistent murmuring” sounded like “a single droning persistent voice,”²⁵³ equivalent of her constant inner battle, but also when Mary Lou was telling her of her sexual experiences, Melissa could see herself and Mary Lou as if looking from the second floor – the position of the woman. Even the delicate process of coming out is insinuated, talking in riddles:

‘Would you ever like to run away from home?’ Mary Lou said. ‘I don’t know,’ I said uneasily. Mary Lou wiped at her mouth and gave me a mean narrow look. [. . .] At an upstairs window someone was watching us—was it a man or was it a woman—someone stood there listening hard. [. . .] She said, ‘Shit—they’d just find me. Then everything would be worse.’²⁵⁴

Hesitation to come out is palpable, as the girls anticipate it would only worsen everything. Their sexuality is inhibited: “every other thought you think is a forbidden thought [. . .] there were things you didn’t talk about, back then.”²⁵⁵ The sense of repression is strengthened, as the woman declares that they “had been very bad girls” and that they knew “her house was forbidden territory.”²⁵⁶ The woman asks: “[your parents] don’t know anything about you, do they?—what you do, and what you think? You and Mary Lou,”²⁵⁷ and Melissa confirms that they do not. The story’s abundance of such ambiguous remarks would be adequately explained by the interpretation of Melissa and Mary Lou’s relationship as possibly homosexual.

Oates maintains: “as a woman and as a writer, I have long wondered at the wellsprings of female masochism,”²⁵⁸ and this fascination is expressed in “Haunted.”

²⁵² Oates, “Haunted,” 14-17.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵⁸ Oates, “They All Just Went Away,” 561.

At Melissa's—and later the woman's—hands, the willow switch is used as a whip, symbolic of sin and transgression. The inherent sense of guilt is expressed via the actions of the woman: "Lie down on that mattress, Melissa, she told me. You know you must be punished."²⁵⁹ Melissa is quite literally 'beating herself about it'. After all, one sentence encapsulates the short story perfectly: "*Once upon a time there were two little princesses, two sisters, who did forbidden things.*"²⁶⁰ Intensely feminine, the story inspects the notions of obedience, paralysis and sexual repression.

With its brevity and focus on a familial relationship instead of a sexual one, "The Temple" provides a contrast to "Haunted." "The Temple" examines maternal love and motherhood as a woman's duty and source of fulfillment. The story takes place in a garden which could perhaps be understood as a feminine space, additionally evoking the title of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

In addition to the mother's apparent affection towards the child, Oates employs feminine imagery, too. The portrayal of a suggestive 'wound'—where the eventual baby skeleton is found—is presented: "she dug again, deepening and broadening the hole which was like a wound in the jungle-like vegetation,"²⁶¹ almost as if implying a female reproductive system. According to Jerrold E. Hogle, "the Gothic is quite consistently about the connection of abject monster figures to the primal and engulfing morass of the maternal."²⁶² As we could see with the predecessors Shelley and Gilman, the notion of maternity, the child as something monstrous and the question of parental abandonment are very pertinent to the Female Gothic, even now. In Moers' view, "the material in *Frankenstein* about the abnormal, or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie justifies, as much as does its famous monster, Mary Shelley's reference to the novel as 'my hideous progeny.'"²⁶³ The mother-child relationship is indeed one much scrutinized in Oates' works, for instance Clara from *A Garden of Earthly Delights* or Loretta from *them*. The child of "The Temple" is monstrous in Frankensteinian sense, the Gothic features underscoring the complex issue of motherhood.

"Subway" portrays the female protagonist Rosellen and her haphazard search for love in the subway trains. Like Connie's absorption with her looks, Rosellen too

²⁵⁹ Oates, "Haunted," 18.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶¹ Oates, "The Temple," 347.

²⁶² Hogle, *Gothic Fiction*, 10.

²⁶³ Moers, *Literary Women*, 99.

appears to make great effort to look desirable: “trying not to turn my ankle in my spike-heeled spaghetti-strap shoes, my hair that’s so sexy-black you’d suspect it must be dyed, [having] some strange glisten of excitement in my black-mascara eyes and panting crimson mouth.”²⁶⁴ She is utterly desperate, helplessly fleeing from her loneliness and single life: “*Please love me, please look at me, how can you look away? Here I am.*”²⁶⁵ Such feverish implorations are recurrent in the story, even marking its beginning and end. When she is being pushed from the platform, a thought flashes in her mind: “even then I was thinking *He touched me, it was a human touch. He chose me because I am beautiful and desirable. He chose me over all others.* But already I am on the track.”²⁶⁶ She sexualizes the male touch even when it was done with malicious intent. She is not only the assailant’s victim; she is a victim of her own dependency. Alone, she is a mere ‘ghost of a woman’. The story epitomizes women’s endless striving for eternal love and partnership as a means of redemption. It attacks the matrimonial model of Ann Radcliffe, where the story ends happily with a marriage and lifelong partnership.

Horror of the old age permeates the story of “Face.” This overtly feminist work, just like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” features an Old, nameless Woman with eroded sanity probably due to the losses and hardships she had to endure. The lack of concrete, individual names only emphasizes the societal invisibility and anonymity that accompanies older age - void of her husband and children, thus lacking the family ties as well as looks, the Old Woman is rendered virtually invisible. Looking at the opening lines, it is important to establish how they relate to the whole work: “Stay away from her, they said. Don’t even look at her. Don’t let her see *you.*”²⁶⁷ They are emblematic of a larger problem of how society turns a blind eye on elderly people, especially women. The physically distorted portrayal of the woman corresponds to the society’s distorted view of her. In *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, Diane Negra argues as follows: “Postfeminism thrives on anxiety about ageing and redistributes this anxiety among a variety of generational

²⁶⁴ Oates, “Subway,” 141-142.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁶⁷ Oates, “Face,” 176.

clusters while also always extending the promise/possibility of age evasion.”²⁶⁸ But where does this tension over ageing stem from?

Moers aptly comment that “from the moment of birth, the looks of a girl are examined with ruthless scrutiny by all around her,”²⁶⁹ this aesthetic quality being perceived as superior to the woman’s character, skill or wit. When the looks are recognized as a key aspect of a woman’s life, the withering of youthful looks and beauty becomes highly undesirable. Moreover, due to the physical as well as mental deterioration that accompanies old age, a woman is often viewed—sometimes justly—as having decreased societal prestige, wealth and power. The Woman of “Face,” her disheveled, odd appearance and her mental regression go hand in hand with the crumbling, decadent surroundings of decaying buildings and barns.

In sum, in the case of “Face,” Oates instills terror to the reader not through depicting horrific corpses nor supernatural ghosts, but via appealing to the fundamental fear of growing old and eventually dying alone, inherent to every human.

The final short story, “Big Momma,” features a young, trusting heroine at the onset of puberty. With her whole body gaining weight, enlarging—breasts and hips including—due to the growth spurt, she is very self-conscious about her weight. This contributes to Violet’s deep insecurity – not only about her body, but about her value as a person altogether. Similarly to “Subway,” the heroine is enormously desperate and dependent on external validation. A shared theme of the female desire to be liked is presented. Again, the heroine goes to great lengths in an attempt to achieve it:

At school she’d borrowed her friend Rita Mae’s new lipstick [. . .] that gave her a dazzling-sexy look (she thought), so after school the eyes of older guys trailed after her. [. . .] At the new school, unless she wore Midnight Kiss lipstick and painted her nails dark maroon, faked a black rose tattoo on the inside of her arm, and ‘pierced’ her ear with a mean-looking silver clamp the way Rita Mae Clovis showed her, Violet was totally invisible.²⁷⁰

Male interest is the focal point around which “Big Momma” revolves; if it is not granted, the female is deemed invisible. That is why Violet is ecstatic when her unquenchable thirst for attention and acceptance is satiated by the Clovis family. In “Big Momma,” Oates depicts a world that consists only of two binary extremes. If

²⁶⁸ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12.

²⁶⁹ Moers, *Literary Women*, 108.

²⁷⁰ Oates, “Big Momma.”

extreme affection and desirability are not achieved, consignment to oblivion and insignificance follows, even bordering on violence, as Violet had grown to:

fear and hate the school bus for the driver was indifferent to older boys bullying younger children and girls. The driver seemed not even to notice how Violet had been singled out by several ninth-grade boys for particular torment since she was new, and easily intimidated. *They're just teasing, can't take a joke, how'n hell are you going to survive in the real world?* Somehow it was worse, the driver was a woman.²⁷¹

The heroine is forced to strive for extraordinariness - in all parts of her life, but most importantly, her physical appearance. Her mother does not serve as a source of support. Providing a social commentary, the mother's absence underlines the female repression in an overpowering regime of patriarchy.

Mr. Clovis and his family not only immediately fulfill the position of her surrogate family, but also serve as a source of romantic and sexual excitement: "Again, Mr. Clovis winked at Violet. That wink!—Violet squirmed, and giggled, and shivered, and looked quickly away."²⁷² Violet, an utterly ordinary girl, feels 'special', since the Clovis family took such an interest in her. Additionally, Mr. Clovis continually gives her sweets, which is reminiscent of the male predatory behavior displayed in Arnold of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?." It is also possible that Mr. Clovis is trying to further 'fatten up' Violet, with Big Momma's future feeding in mind. It is notable that even though Violet knows she should not accept the doughnut or ice cream, she accepts every time; in this way, the story addresses the issue of temptation and subsequent succumbing to it.

Expressions such as "the resident patriarch" or "[Violet] both dreaded and wished for the man's gaze"²⁷³ indicate that the feminist overtone in the short story is not an accidental byproduct, but instead resulted from Oates' feminist self-awareness:

'And you know, Vi'let, you'd be a whole lot prettier if you smiled more, and didn't frown.' [. . .] 'Just remember, Vi'let: your step-daddy Clovis prefers you to smile. Every time you're about to frown, think: Step-Daddy Clovis prefers me to smile.'²⁷⁴

Oates exaggerates the inherent sexism with the repetition of this invasive remark, walking a fine line between slimy creepiness and ridiculousness. Mr. Clovis is claiming property of her body, both symbolically and literally, as the story ends with

²⁷¹ Oates, "Big Momma."

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

using her as their pet's next meal. Throughout the whole duration of the story, Violet acts subserviently, quite literally giving up her life in order to please Mr. Clovis—the imposing male figure—being the ultimate act of submissiveness.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to carefully analyze seven short stories by the contemporary American author Joyce Carol Oates, namely “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” “The Widows,” “Haunted,” “The Temple,” “Subway,” “Face,” and “Big Momma.” The selection of the stories has been carried out methodically, with regard to the time of publication, the literary mode and characterization. In an effort to fully explore Oates’ Gothic vision, approximately one short story per decade has been chosen, chronicling her output from 1960s to 2010s. The works have been dealt with chronologically. It is worth noting that a great deal of the sources were drawn from the Internet due to the unfavorable circumstances concerning libraries at the time of the writing.

The first chapter attempted to shed light on the discussed author, presenting an overview of her life, influences and other works. Her troubled childhood, experiences and adventures of growing up in the rural upstate New York as well as devouring works by Lewis Carroll and others were all factors that influenced the stylistic, schematic and thematic choices Oates made while writing her short fiction. Well-educated and well-versed on a myriad of intellectual subjects ranging from literature to philosophy, Oates wields immense literary power with which she has been invigorating the contemporary literature (Gothic or otherwise). The task of the second chapter, subdivided into five parts, was to provide an accurate account of the Gothic tradition, including its main tendencies. The forerunners, along with their legacies and contributions that helped to establish the Gothic tradition, were given. The main features (such as preoccupation with the past, the atmosphere of fear and oppression and gloomy, remote environments) were presented as well as contemporary authors and recent developments. The concepts of the grotesque and the sublime along with a difference between terror and horror were outlined. The final part of the chapter sought to encapsulate the Female Gothic.

The initial two chapters, though descriptive in nature, provided us with a useful tool for understanding Oates’ short fiction. Additionally, the second chapter not only offered the Gothic framework in order to help interpret Oates’ Gothic works but attempted to re-establish its academic significance as well.

The third chapter, standing for the main body of the work, carried out the analyses of the individual short stories. It demonstrated clear ties not only to the Gothic

tradition, but also to Poe, James and Gilman's influence. In Oates' Gothic short stories, the past menacingly looms over the deceptively secure present. Oates' fixation on probing what lurks in the dark, private, unfathomable recesses of our minds—a wellspring of artistic ideas, according to her—is reflected in her work. Not insisting on complete closure, Oates utilizes ambiguous open endings, inviting the reader to fill in the gaps. To a degree, nearly all the stories bear marks of experimentation with chronology. Predominantly, the bleak, discomfiting setting of the stories parallels the characters' disturbed psyche. Rather than an explicit display of violence, Oates prefers to hint at it instead, insinuating it implicitly, which is the equivalent of the terror in the Radcliffian sense. Oates' style is opaque, highly elliptical, with frequent use of stream of consciousness. With stories at times bizarre, hallucinatory and surrealistic, like "Subway" or "Haunted," and at other times eerily psychologically realistic as "The Widows," Oates' impressive versatility 'reanimates' the Gothic genre.

The fourth and final chapter started with specifying the author's dynamic attitude and cautious participation in the feminist ideology. Next, the chapter focused on the analysis of the seven female-centered short stories viewed from the feminist perspective. In the stories, the male figure—if present—is sinister, threatening and unassailable, as in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" or "Big Momma." This villain embodies the evil, which the heroines must face. The heroine, almost exclusively in the position of a victim, is egocentric and sensual. The possible romance is never successful and never ends in marriage; instead, it only makes the heroine repressed and unhappy. Evidence from the text implies that rather than economic or political, psychological oppression is used. Moreover, sisterhood and female companionship is frequently employed as a mode of resisting patriarchy. In the stories without a prominent male character, such as "The Temple" or "Face," Oates probes the pertinent female questions of motherhood and aging. Through questioning its code of conduct, Oates indicts the contemporary American society that often overlooks female psychological health and integrity.

Joyce Carol Oates is an important American author who, in the Gothic mode, addresses the complex issues of identity and the conflicted, intricate notion of self. It was demonstrated that her work, combining eerie themes with moments of psychological realism, manages to evoke the Gothic effect. Multiple facets of the Gothic are applied, such as the grotesque, the supernatural, the sublime, the foreign,

strange and mysterious imagery. Oates' work encompasses a *mélange* of traditional Gothic elements and sensibilities such as isolated setting, symbolism, intense, visceral psychological states and eloquent, perverse depictions of fear and horror. Through the themes of innocence and trust, Oates models the lives of young American women, presenting mostly passive heroines depleted of power, with a deeply original, dark vision. The obsessive adventures that the broken characters embark upon not only push them to the emotional limits, but also render them alienated and can lead to possible disintegration of identity. Scrutinizing the complexity of the human psyche, the strained characters and their relationships struggle in an effort to set themselves free. Displaying flexibility with length, characterization and narrative structure, Oates' stories, highly allusive and full of repression, depict the anguish surrounding her distraught characters. Oates, putting a sardonic spin on the American Dream, evokes a unique, thoroughly American culture and its anxieties. The concern of the search for self continues to reverberate in modern culture. This thesis has demonstrated that Oates provides a heavy contribution to the Gothic scholarship. By enabling the reader to immerse themselves into the terrifying, nightmarish world of trauma, violence, isolation and death, Oates offers a new interpretation of the Gothic tradition, and thus offers innovative ways of reading and valuing such works.

This thesis' topic, dealing with a marriage of an underestimated genre, author and format, addresses the sorely neglected academic area of the contemporary Gothic short story. Nevertheless, the thesis, potentially laying the groundwork for additional research, has examined but a fraction of Oates' voluminous work. It would be interesting to examine other Gothic stories by this author or compare them with other contemporary American writers such as Stephen King, to see what new directions the Gothic will take.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá sedmi povídkami od Joyce Carol Oatesové, a to jmenovitě: „Where Are You Going Where Have You Been?“ (1966), „The Widows“ (1977), „Haunted“ (1987), „The Temple“ (1996), „Subway“ (2003), „Face“ (2007) a „Big Momma“ (2016). Cílem práce bylo vykonání jejich důkladné analýzy v kontextu gotické literatury. Výběr povídek byl ovlivněn časem vydání, žánrem a postavami. Za účelem obsáhnutí co největšího časového úseku byla zvolena přibližně jedna povídka na jedno desetiletí. Zvýšená míra výskytu internetových zdrojů byla zapříčiněna nepříznivými pandemickými podmínkami, které neumožňovali návštěvu knihoven.

První kapitola čitatele seznamuje s autorkou, jejím životem a literárním pozadím. Turbulentní dětství plné dobrodružství strávené v severním New Yorku a čtení děl nejen od Lewisa Carrola autorku ovlivnilo v jejích stylistických i tematických volbách.

Cílem druhé kapitoly bylo uvést čtenáře do kontextu gotické literatury – od jejích počátků, přes její znaky a hlavní představitele až po současnost. Závěr druhé kapitoly stručně uvádí přehled ženské gotické literatury. První dvě kapitoly, i když spíše informativního charakteru, poskytují užitečný prostředek pro následnou literární analýzu.

Třetí kapitola, která představuje hlavní část práce, dokazuje existenci jasné spojitosti mezi autorčinými povídkami a gotickou literární tradicí. Navazujíc na tvorbu Edgara Alana Poea, Henryho Jamese a Charlotte Gilmanové se povídky Oatesové nesou v znamení fascinace temnými, záhadnými zákoutími lidské mysli, její komplikovanosti a komplexnosti. Popouštějíc uzdu fantazii, povídky nejednou ústí do otevřeného konce. Místo explicitního zobrazování násilí ho povídky spíše nepřímou naznačují ve stylu popisu teroru od Ann Radcliffové. Povídky často obsahují narativní techniku proudu vědomí, soustavně se zabývají minulostí, strachem a smrtí, nebo tématy nevinnosti a represe, a často experimentují s časovou posloupností dějů. Skrz povídky buď surrealistické a bizarní, nebo psychologicky realistické, Oatesová vlévá novou sílu do žánru gotické literatury.

Cílem poslední čtvrté kapitoly bylo nahlédnout na povídky z feministické perspektivy. Ženské postavy, nacházející se v bezútěšném prostředí, které zrcadlí jejich křehký až narušený psychický stav, jsou často zobrazované jako pasivní, citlivé,

někdy egoistické. Tyto nevyrovnané postavy se vydávají na horečné dobrodružství, která atakují jejich emoční limity a mohou dokonce vést až k rozkladu osobnosti. Často jsou nuceny čelit hroživé mužské postavě, která představuje zlo, ale i svádět nelítostný vnitřní boj se sebou samými. Střetáváme se spíše s psychologickým nežli ekonomickým nebo politickým útlakem. Příběhy bez této dominantní mužské postavy se zabývají ženskými otázkami mateřství a stárnutí. Sesterstvo a ženská soudržnost jsou zobrazovány jako prostředek vzdoru vůči patriarchátu.

Povídky Oatesové, nezřídka využívající symbolismus a mnohoznačnost, zobrazují čtenářům více podob gotického žánru, jako je například groteskno, nadpřirozeno, vznešeno nebo zobrazování tajemných a strašidelných jevů. Právě mrazivé zobrazení izolace a odcizení, zasazené do jedinečné americké kultury a prostředí, umožnilo autorce dosáhnout originální hrůzostrašnou sílu povídek.

Oatesová disponuje vypravěčskou zručností, kterou obohacuje (nejen) současnou gotickou literaturu. Zpochybňuje chování současné americké společnosti, která často přehlíží mentální zdraví žen. Její povídky představují sondu do hlubin ztrápeného ženského vědomí a identity čelící smrti, čímž nabízí současnou interpretaci gotické literární tradice a ukazuje nám ji v novém, moderním světle.

Tato práce se zabývá akademicky podceňovaným a marginalizovaným tématem, jemuž se doteď nedostalo mnoho pozornosti. Bylo by zajímavé přezkoumat další gotické povídky od dané autorky, nebo je porovnat s tvorbou například Stephena Kinga, a načrtnout možné směry, kterými se gotická literatura bude vyvíjet dále.

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Anotácia

Autor: Bc. Petra Jurčišinová

Fakulta: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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Kľúčové slová: Joyce Carol Oatesová, poviedky, gotické znaky, teror, horor, nadprirodzeno, feminizmus, ženská gotika

Práca sa zaoberá analýzou siedmich poviedok súčasnej Americkej autorky Joyce Carol Oatesovej so zameraním na gotické znaky. Práca predovšetkým identifikuje a skúma využitie teroru a hororu, psychologické elementy a motívy, nadprirodzeno, a taktiež hororové archetypy. Ďalej sa práca zaoberá ženskou problematikou a ženským vedomím, vzhľadom na to že všetky uvedené poviedky obsahujú ženské protagonistky, a zasadzuje ich do kontextu gotickej literatúry.

Annotation

Author: Bc. Petra Jurčišínová

Faculty: Faculty of Arts, Palacký University in Olomouc

Department: Department of English and American Studies

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This thesis is concerned with an analysis of seven selected short stories written by a prolific contemporary American author Joyce Carol Oates with a special focus on Gothic features. The thesis specifically attempts to identify and examine the use of terror and horror, the supernatural, psychological elements and motifs as well as horror archetypes. Furthermore, due to the fact that all the given short stories feature a female protagonist, the thesis explores the topic of the female condition and experience and contextualizes it within Gothic fiction.