



# Instances of Violence in Joyce Carol Oates's Short Fiction

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The aim of the present paper is to reappraise some short stories published by Joyce Carol Oates in the last decades of the twentieth century in order to identify a pattern of violence that pervaded, in the writer's opinion, the American cultural landscape of the time, one marked and marred by consumerism, material saturation and void spiritual expectations, as well as to show that the writer's obsessive recurrence to violence was, before the age of online communication, a genuine reflection of a society in which the individual's desire for public visibility would easily become a substitute for fame and/or success.

Keywords: violence, American life, American Dream, home, displacement.

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One of the most prolific writers in the United States of America, Joyce Carol Oates has written, over the course of several decades, short stories, novels and essays in which she has depicted, alluringly yet with brutal accuracy, scenes of American life, most often with violence as key conceptual pattern. She was awarded the National Book Award in 1970, was nominated twice for the Pulitzer Prize and three times for the Nobel Prize for Literature (with the latest nomination in 2007). On the American literary scene she has always been a rather unique and singular figure, given her proclivity, her frequently assumed Victorian narrative stance, her inclination for Gothic fictional instances and the violent narrative twists that are a defining element of her writing.

One of the most frequently encountered issues in her fiction, for which she has often been criticised, is the pervasive use of violence. Whether inflicted on men or on women, whether triggered by men or by women, violence is so frequent and so intense that readers take it for granted instead of being shocked by its amount, recurrence and intensity. Throughout Oates's work,

violence has been symbolic of contemporary American culture. Be it linear narration, stream of consciousness, fragments of diaries, temporal dislocation or collage, Oates's fiction is all-encompassing of the American culture and way of life, a fictional exercise in experiencing America. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claimed that “the violence associated with some of her fiction is a result of her sense that ordinary people cannot always articulate or even understand the ways in which they are trapped in the convulsions of history.” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2276)

One might wonder why American culture, which is the quintessence of freedom, self-sufficiency and self-determination, keeps producing such rising violence, as, at least with the characters in Oates's fictional space violence is a *modus vivendi*, an intrinsic part of their lives. A potential answer might be that the very culture of comfort and convenience, dominated by the myth of progress and success, ultimately turns individuals into captives of their own pursuit, once they attain a point where there is no more hope, as everything that has been promised them has already been achieved. It

is at this point of material saturation (either individual or general, for, by and large, few of Oates's characters are materially well-off or rich) that individuals start looking for another world in which to assert their individuality. According to one of her critics,

the work of Joyce Carol Oates uses ideological frameworks like the 'American dream' to artistically unravel the definitions by which it has been constructed and the consequences of attempts to actualize it. The personal interactions between the characters in her stories are the meeting points of different interpretations of ideologies. The reader can interpret from this the multifarious influences that filter into ideological constructions. Oates' prodigious ability to realize these interactions through various fictional modes of writing produces a range of perspectives to the central ideologies that she seeks to unpack. The awareness of mode that this produces is distinctly postmodernist in its awareness of the limitations in its construction. Oates seeks through her works, to awaken contemporary society to its own destruction and to deepen the consciousness of her readers to the tragic dimensions of life. [...] Violence therefore must be faced as omnipresent in the society. This observation is thrust not just as an obvious commonplace but as an urgent insight that the most revered rituals, games and relationships are necessarily interpenetrated by violence. Rather than trying to maintain standards of civilization in the face of violence, Oates's characters are forced to reaffirm or reassess their values as they encounter violence at the heart of all their most intimate and valuable experiences. In the bewildering profusion and violence of modern times [...] she finds her subject. (Ramdinthari, 258)

It is a point where reality has become an ambiguous construct of words, images, information, clichés, the meaning of which has been suspended by constant repetition. What remains is the gratuity of forms devoid of meaning, yet claiming a meaning. The individuals are left with nothing but the urge to look for a revelation elsewhere and thus, by appropriating violence, they try to make sense of and create order in, the chaotic universe surrounding them. As Oates herself declared in an interview, in an answer that has become an iconic statement, "when people say there is too much violence in [my books], what they are saying is that there is too much reality in life." (Oates in Frueh, 2011)

Closely related to violence are the symbols of dislocation, of which drifting away from home and consequently, looking for a familiar replacement, have become a persistent concern with her characters. However, whether denying the notion of home or just

ignoring it, they find themselves in a world where the commonplace is a perpetual source of menace. As Ellen Friedman stated, her characters "have a history, have attachments, they are the products of their culture though they are not always ready or able to recognize it. Her fiction does reflect a heightened sensitivity to the dangers of living, yet it is a character's 'distance from home', from [...] an acceptance of his relation to the real world that is often a measure of the dangers that await him." (Friedman, 2-3) In the critic's opinion, the danger facing Oates's characters lurks precisely in the chaotic maze of contemporary America and in the way in which the individual negotiates the terms of positioning him/herself relative to the "quintessentially American notion of freedom and self-sufficiency." (3-4) Throughout Oates's fiction, in novels and short-stories alike, the characters strive to find a place where the American Dream could be further pursued, but instead find themselves in gloomy, violent, disruptive instances of history, be it the history of America or that of their city, suburbia or local community. According to the same critic,

Oates is preoccupied with the idea that the self is not a substitute for the world but that a selfhood is possible only when it is located in and delineated by a specific temporal and spatial environment. Characteristically, Oates's novels begin nearly as paradigms of American history. [...] Oates's protagonists find themselves by a variety of routes free from the strictures of family, place and history. Yet when they attempt to follow the imperatives of the self, they inevitably confront chaos, madness or death. In the romance tradition of American fiction, many of Oates's characters strain to escape the world in which they find themselves, but they are repeatedly defeated. To survive, they are forced to acknowledge the world and respect its limits. (4)

I have singled out three short stories that are, in my opinion, illustrative of Joyce Carol Oates's multifarious concern with a universe in which violence is a dominant trait of the characters' lives. In them, unlike in most of Oates's fiction, violence is subdued, but it is nevertheless the core of the narrative: it is ignored, fought against, eluded in a desperate attempt at establishing order and coherence in a quintessentially distorted and incoherent environment, but one cannot fail to acknowledge it. In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, violence is cast upon the main character from the outside; in *Golden Gloves* it becomes a goal, a substitute for the American Dream, whereas in *Plot* it turns into an obsession.

In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*, the meaning of the word 'home' is disrupted once a supposedly familiar, protective place turns out to be not only devoid of protectiveness, but outright menacing. This is the story of a teenage girl who attempts at escaping



her ordinary home and her family's indifference and disapproval. Deluded by pop music, she plunges into a parallel dream-world of romantic promises, only to find herself confronted with a violent situation that climaxes in – readers are left to infer - rape and death. As her mind is “all filled with trashy dreams”, she develops a double personality as a response to the urge to satisfy both her uncertain teenage aspirations and the demands of a stable environment that fails to satisfy her. When she first meets Arnold Friend, the man who has kept track of all her movements, she does not know whether to step back or to regard him as the hero of her dreams. It is because of this moment of confusion in a decentred universe with only an apparent sense of stability that the events take a dramatic, violent turn. It is the music and his “gold car” that allure to her before she becomes aware that this unknown man “had come from nowhere before that and belonged nowhere; that everything about him and even about the music that was so familiar to her was only half-real.” (Oates, 2286)

The protagonist, Connie, is deceived by the things she has taken for granted, she is exposed to the embodiment of an unfamiliar world, in an almost Freudian instance of the ‘uncanny’ – the feeling of simultaneously experiencing the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. On the one hand, what she sees is the strange, yet alluring man who calls onto her to come out of the house, using words that shatter her familiar world and who threatens to destroy her house and her family should she fail to do so; on the other hand, what she simultaneously experiences is “the face of a forty-year-old baby”, impenetrable, mute, devoid of human feelings. What reality has made of her dreams is a terrible hypocrisy. Nor can she rely on her father's help, therefore she has to yield to the threatening violence, to become the submissive victim of her own delusive dreams: “Be nice to me, be sweet like you can and what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in?” (Oates, 2290) For Friend, to whom she eventually surrenders, the brown-eyed Connie is “my sweet little blue-eyed girl” (2291); she is thus made ‘invisible’, just another girl in a vast, dull American small-town landscape that renders teenage dreams void and deceptive. The theme of anonymity and symbolic ‘absence’ is recurrent in the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, who admitted that,

The theme of invisibility has haunted me for many years [...]. A woman feels ‘invisible’ in a public sense precisely because her physical being – her ‘visibility’ – figures so prominently in her identity. She is judged as a body, she is ‘attractive’ or ‘unattractive’, while knowing that her deepest self is inward, and secret: knowing, hoping that her spiritual essence is a great deal more complex than the casual eye of the observer will allow. (Oates in Showalter et al., 238-9)

If, in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*, violence makes the protagonist acknowledge that “it was something that was hers, that belonged to her”, for the character in the short-story *Golden Gloves* violence is a revelation, a potential means of attaining power and success. Having been born with a physical deformity, he has grown up in fear of physical pain, in fear of being rejected by other children and by his family. After restorative surgery, he starts taking boxing lessons and starts dreaming of a magical universe of power, to be bestowed upon him by the golden gloves. He experiences the excitement of violence, which becomes a means of asserting himself in a world in which he has experienced nothing but hurt, shame and disappointment. In the boxing ring, his life acquires the quality of pervasive idealism and the boxing gloves act as a barrier against a chaotic and threatening environment.

The violence that the protagonist of *Golden Gloves* experiences triggers emotional and violent responses: “His clenched fists inside the shining gloves. Eyes narrowed and shifting behind the hot lids as if they weren't his own eyes but those belonging to someone he didn't yet know, an adult man, a man for whom all things were possible.” (Oates, 1987) The romantic hope, the unspoken promise that nothing would ever happen to him, that he would never be hurt, will only be shattered by an accident which prevents him from boxing any further. The accident engenders a process of painful enlightenment – an inner turmoil, a fear of “the blow you can't see, the blow that knocks you out, the blow out of nowhere” (idem) – a metaphor for the strokes of destiny that can take one unawares. Reconciliation with destiny comes under the form of marriage, but this translates into the individual's compromising on his freedom and eventually proves ineffective. His wife's pregnancy makes him realize that she would be in a place out of his mental and spiritual reach and thus he gives in to his inability to live with someone, to live outside the boundaries of violence that he has symbolically established as a comforting space.

In the same line of thought, *Plot* is the story of an obsession with violence. It is an embedded narrative, a story within a story, built on narrative overlapping. The terror at sensing that one's privacy is intruded upon, a terror that mounts into an overpowering feeling, brings about another way of experiencing relief – in this case, by the protagonist's escape into a fictional universe and consequently by his urge to turn reality into a story: “Given: the existence of X. Given: the existence of myself. Given: X's obsessive interest in me. Given: the universe we share together, he and I. Given: the deteriorating nature of human relationships in America today. I don't pretend to understand it, though I am contributing to it.” (Oates, 1973) *Plot* thus becomes the story of a distorted personality, caught up in the mental network of an obsession with an alleged

pursuer, whose motives remain unclear and impossible to decipher. Constantly referring to X's "obsessive" interest in him, the character/narrator merely projects his own self upon a society that is oblivious to him - "[he] woke up one morning to discover he was alone." (Oates, 230) Consequently, the readers plunge into the complex web of a human mind that refuses to accept that it is alone in the world. The protagonist's unconscious desire to be seen turns into a fictive desire to be pursued. He nevertheless acknowledges this fact by projecting it upon a fictional character that he himself creates, a character that is, in fact, his own repressed self. His contribution to the "deteriorating relationships in America today" is his rejection of his family, which in turn leads to his being rejected by the woman he loves.

There is a certain degree of ambiguity regarding the protagonist's alleged pursuer - he might be either a detective hired by his father or a disappointed lover, seeking revenge for Nicholas having taken his girlfriend away from him. Whatever the reason, the outcome is sheer terror at the thought of being watched. Intrusion into his privacy is rejected, be it out of paternal love or out of a stranger's desire for revenge. On the edge of terror, he keeps running back into his home, which is, however, nothing but a "laughable sanctuary". Having run away from his parents' house, Nicholas has found a substitute for home, but it is one that offers him no real shelter. Realizing that the pressure of reality is too much for him to handle, the protagonist seeks escape into a fictional world, thus hoping to gain control over the overpowering constraints of the outer world. He tries to elude the violent reality by recurring to a confessional narrative mode and by devising an imaginary life pattern, a 'plot'. In thus doing, he tries to surrender his isolation, his being alone in a menacing world, to a fictional, albeit violent, universe, the protagonists of which are the victim and the pursuer: "I will escape this self-pity by returning to my plot." (Oates, 231)

A plot invariably entails a fictional construct, a communication situation, a text producer and a receiver/ an audience. In this short story, the plot becomes a creative process, involving both anxiety and relief, an attempt at establishing a delicate balance between terror and reassurance, a struggle to achieve psychological freedom, but the character is in fact merely pursuing his own terror of life. Writing, whether artistic or merely confessional, proves to be of no help, as it cannot offer him liberation from the grip of fear while the audience, if any, is no more sensitive to his turmoil than anybody in the 'real' world:

My brain is going, but before it goes completely I want to make very clear my dislike for you: my readers, who are reading through my life as fast as possible, skimming along, impatient with me and hoping for some final mess. You

read, people like you, only to whisper through your teeth and think: 'Jesus, there's somebody worse off than I am.' Why else read, why else plough your way through somebody else's plots? A plot is not fiction, as you know, but very real; it is the record of somebody's brain, a trail like a snail's tail, sticky and shameful..." (229)

The character/narrator becomes aware of the fact that his readers are themselves a deceptive entity: if theirs is a world imbued with violence, they are themselves on a perpetual quest for fictional/virtual violence; marred by this reality, they lack empathy and expect, with a sense of anticipatory enjoyment, purging fictional violence, which ultimately becomes the measure of their 'normalcy' in real life. Thus, the protagonist's attempt at writing turns out to be deceptive, as it offers nothing but an increased awareness of his deeply-rooted fear of himself. Enclosure and escape are intertwined: "Nick was sometimes paralyzed with himself. The thought of himself. He sets himself on fire, having arrived home." (229)

The sense of place turns into a sense of displacement in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, where the first part of the title renders the woman the 'object of the male gaze', an alluring presence that the beholder does not want to lose and urges to stay, while the second part confines her to a space that is limited and dangerous. However, the 'where' is the element that unites both instances, it is the betrayal of the desire to escape by the impossibility of doing so. There is no escaping the 'where' of home, which could well be anywhere in America, there is no 'where' to turn to, for every new 'where' is equally alike and anonymous. At the same time, both the 'where' of home and the 'where' of the dream of escape are, for the teenage girl, equally dangerous, with the violent end lurking behind every instance of her dialogue with the mischievous, evil man who will eventually rape and kill her. If, in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been* home turns out to be just "a cardboard box that can be knocked down anytime", in *Golden Gloves* the sense of belonging turns into a sense of estrangement, once the protagonist fails to accept the newly discovered, apparently redeeming, reality of marriage and drifts away from his pregnant wife, realizing that 'home' would never bring him back the promise of a glorious future. In *Plot*, 'home', or whatever the certainty of belonging to a certain place implies, is a void concept, a "laughable sanctuary" subject to the menace threatening from outside. In all of these three narrative instances, the established American notion of 'domesticity' is always threatened from within, even if the trigger, violence, comes from the outer world. The protagonists' desire to create a paradise out of the realm of the bleak reality of their lives, the desire to redefine their identity, to find a new place that would give them a sense of belongingness,



is ultimately shattered when their apparently normal, ordinary lives take a violent turn.

According to Ellen Friedman, there is a sense of place and time in Joyce Carol Oates's fiction that transgresses the borders of Naturalism, as her characters are not overwhelmed by the malevolent forces of heredity and of the environment; on the contrary, they rise above them. However, when they do, they always have to deal with an external force that is menacing and destructive, and it is against this force that they struggle, animated by a destructive force within. In the critic's opinion, Oates does not use violence metaphorically, but places it in a very real setting, in ordinary circumstances of life; violence is not an image projected by the imagination, but a grotesque imitation of life. In this line of thought, what Oates herself suggests is that, "given the terms of our existence, the facts of the twentieth century life – increased mobility, the faded power of family life, religion, ideology and our orgiastic technological society, then the escape into the 'fabulous', into the isolation of our fantasies and fears is only an intensification of these terms, not a true liberation from them." (Oates in Friedman, 14)

At the same time, the pervasive use of violence is, in Oates's words, a reflection of contemporary America – "the America screaming from the headlines of our daily presses." (Oates in Friedman, 8) As individuals strive to get out of the grip of traditional American institutions, they only find themselves vulnerable in solitude. But in solitude, as the protagonists of these short stories demonstrate, they long for public visibility (a substitute for the traditional American notion of success), they long to be perceived, gazed at and/or publicly acknowledged, which eventually brings them destruction. In Friedman's opinion, Oates suggests that "the American recoil against a life dominated by restrictive institutions has driven us too far in an opposite and just as dangerous direction, that we have substituted a self-isolating freedom for imprisoning conventions and traditions." (Friedman, 23)

The recurrent use of violence in Oates's fiction might arise from the psychological pressure of a grim reality that the characters cannot elude; in this respect, they are the narrative counterparts of the subjects of flash-news, with violence so commonplace that it is no longer perceived as shocking. According to Friedman, "Oates's characteristic technique for pointing to the limitations inherent in autonomy is to place those characters who want to be free in a climate of the urgently real [...] a pressing, demanding, actual environment, [...] a judgemental context wherein the value of [their] aspirations may be measured." (69) As Oates herself argued, "the more violent the murders in *Macbeth*, the more relief one can feel at *not* having to perform them. Great art is cathartic; it is always moral." (Oates in Gilbert and Gubar, 2277)

In her subsequent writing, in novels and short-stories alike, Oates would further tackle violence, which has, to date, remained her trademark. In this respect, what these three short stories illustrate is that, in the decades before online communication, the individual's exposure to violence, be it the result of fame (*Golden Gloves*), of a pursuit of authorship and fame (*Plot*) or of vulnerable beauty that can easily be turned into commodity (*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*), could be as damaging as one's willing, intentional exposure to the public eye is nowadays. Thus, Oates's characters, who cannot escape the dullness of ordinary life and instead long for something else, something they can only envisage in the shape of a fabulous, yet elusive, reality, eventually realize that they are vulnerable – both to their unfathomable longings and to the real, violent world in which they are trapped. In their idealistic quest for something else in a world in which comfort, consumerism and convenience are taken for granted, they find that the pursuit of another facet of the American Dream leads to emptiness, futility and nothingness and that they can only survive as individuals by redefining the limits of their existence.

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