

## LITERARY AND AESTHETIC VIEWS OF JOYCE CAROL OATES

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**Abstract:** This article explores the literary and aesthetic perspectives of Joyce Carol Oates, emphasizing her challenge to male-dominated literary criticism and her advocacy for female authors' creative autonomy. It analyzes her thematic focus on violence, trauma, and psychological complexity, deeply rooted in her personal experiences and early environment. Oates's fiction blends realism with symbolic landscapes, often depicting American society through mythologized settings and deeply flawed characters. The study highlights her stylistic range across novels and short stories, her nontraditional feminist stance, and her engagement with the evolving American Dream. Her literary voice is marked by bold narrative experimentation and emotional intensity.

**Key words:** Joyce Carol Oates, American literature, violence in fiction, female authorship, aesthetic views, feminist criticism, American Dream, short stories, psychological realism, literary criticism.

Joyce Carol Oates was critical of the way literary criticism was applied to female authors. In her writing, she defended the right of female writers to depict nature as they knew it, without judging it by the standards of the male-dominated literary establishment. For example, in her novel *Damned* (2013), Oates depicts a scene in which a female writer is criticized for her writing style and told that she must conform to the standards of the male-dominated literary establishment in order to be successful. Oates was also critical of the way literary criticism was used to judge female authors, calling such criticism blatantly sexist. Oates also argued that "women authors should be allowed to explore themes of violence and evil in their works without judging them by the standards of the male-dominated literary establishment. The influence of Oates's childhood on her later work and attitude toward life is evident in the many scenes of rape, abuse, and physical violence in *Wonderland*, *Cybele*, *The Mad Man*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, *The Tattooed Girl*, and others. Oates's childhood can also be reflected in the mythologized landscapes of her novels: the idyllic High Point farm in *We Were the Mulvaney*s, or the rough and ruthless landscapes of Niagara Falls in *The Falls*. Her biographer writes about this:

«Her childhood experiences clearly gave rise to the paradoxical apprehension of the world that marked her adult sensibility: we inhabit a random, often frightening reality marked by ceaseless flux, violent dislocations, ugly surprises, and yet we manage in D.H. Lawrence's sense of phrase, not only to „come through“ but to experience a nostalgic yearning to revisit and recreate that early turbulent world, to recall its austere beauty as well as its anxiety and terror».

However, Oates argues that her “writing does not usually contain overt violence, but much of the time deals with the phenomenon of violence and its consequences, not unlike what the Greek playwrights wrote; in any case, writing is language and, in a very important sense, it is more 'about' language than 'about' subject matter...”

Oates firmly believes that “most writers and poets are probably most strongly influenced by their early environments: they want to capture universal truths in the form of particular, even local, types, and to give life to a larger element of the human psyche through things that are familiar”. However, Oates's work suggests that acknowledging the influence of her predecessors on her writing, and

distancing herself from them, is also important to her. Oates admits that she has learned a great deal from great writers:

«I love drama. I love the memorializing of places. I can read Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence almost as much for the landscape and for the cityscape as for the characters, because the landscape is so vividly portrayed. So when I write I try to do the same thing».

Lewis Carroll is an author whom Oates often cites as an early inspiration. Oates received *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* from her grandmother when she was eight years old, and the book became “the center of her early literary experience”. Jesse Hart, for example, *Wonderland's* protagonist, changes shape, growing fat and thin, just as Alice grows and shrinks; and the novel’s title suggests a fluid American reality, full of surprises, like the *Wonderland* in which Alice finds herself.

Another writer who had a major influence on Oates’s early years was William Faulkner. Greg Johnson identifies “Faulknerian mannerisms” and descriptions in her early stories, while Joanna Creighton recognizes Faulkner's “Absalom, Absalom!” in “Bellefleur’s legendary retelling of family tales,” “historical sweep,” “rhetorical flourishes,” and “circumlocution of time”. In a move reminiscent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Oates created her own world in her early novels and short stories, called *Eden County*, which was based on her experiences as a child in upstate New York. Some of her 1970s novels, such as *Childwold*, are set entirely in *Eden County*. And other novels, such as *The Son morning*, have their origins here. This imaginary, economically disadvantaged rural area, inhabited by poor, often violent and emotionally unstable people, represents a simple and honest life close to the land. It is a place where the veneer of civilization is very thin, and where people’s lives are governed by primordial, uncontrollable forces.

It is also a place where one can get close to the core, the essence of being, and draw strength from it, purify oneself. Although the title “*Eden County*” is not used in her later novels, Oates returns to such landscapes repeatedly, as if she herself draws strength from them. This is the case, for example, with “*The Mad Man*”, “*We Were the Mulvaney’s*”, and “*The Gravedigger's Daughter*”, to name a few. In books as disparate as her stellar novel, *With a Thrill of Falling* (1964), the famous urban epics, *They and Wonderland* (1971), the unfairly ridiculed mystical-political-psychosexual thriller, *The Killers* (1975), the academic chamber play, *Maria: A Life* (1986), the chronicle of the Eisenhower era, *You Must Remember This* (1987), the biographical film about Marilyn Monroe, *Blonde* (2000), and the provincial detective, *Carthage* (2014), characters insist that experience is a mess of fragments and shreds. Jessalyn McLaren in the film, *Night. Sleep. Death. Stars.* reflects that the mental mode she calls “widow thinking” does not help her navigate her changed circumstances, but is nothing more than “barely controlled panic of neurons firing madly”.

It is difficult to separate Oates’s short stories from her novels, since she consistently published volumes in both genres throughout her career. Unlike many writers who write both long and short stories, Oates never subordinated her stories to her novels: taken together, they represent no less a significant achievement, and Oates is by no means a novelist who occasionally writes short stories, much less a storyteller who occasionally writes novels. Both forms are central to her overall work. In many cases, the short stories are crystallized versions of character types and dramatic moments found in the longer works; over the years, the themes and stylistic approaches of the two genres have continued to develop in parallel.

J. C. Oates is interested in “the formulation of the American Dream and the ways in which it has changed and even deteriorated over the decades of American prosperity and supremacy”. Her characters are often prototypes of the nation, and their growth from naivety to wisdom and pain reflect aspects of the national destiny that she sees in the developing society around them. In Oates's stories, naivety is often the innocence of youth; many of the stories focus on teenage girls’ awareness of their own attractiveness and the dangers of the adult world. However, like the United States, such characters retain an unbridled youthful enthusiasm, an arrogant defiance of the future and the outside world.

People's relationships with the world around them are key to many of Oates's stories. Her fascination with the imagery of the American Dream and the implied power of faith and self-creation translates into an awareness of the characters' self-perceptions and, equally, their self-delusions. Many of her characters have a built-in isolation: this does not mean that they are not connected to other people, but that their perceptions are necessarily limited and that they are aware, though not always specifically, of these limitations. J.C.Oates often establishes their subjectivity with remarkable clarity, allowing the reader to bring a broader knowledge and perspective to the story to fill it out and complete the emotional impact. Isolation, detachment, and even alienation create obstacles that her characters struggle to overcome, and although Oates has been criticized for her bleak writing, her characters very often find redemption, hope, and even happiness. However, neither joy nor tragedy is ever complete, since “human experience,” as Oates sees it, “is always a complex and mixed phenomenon”. Although some of her work from the late 1980s demonstrates a more explicitly feminist outlook, Oates was never a feminist writer.

Rather, her feminism or humanism is expressed in her refusal to write stories and novels that have traditionally been written by women, or in restricting her male and female characters to typically male and female behavior, attitudes, emotions, and actions. Oates does not equalize the sexes, but rather celebrates differences and explores women's and men's lives without preconceived assumptions. Reading an Oates story, then, is to peer into a vision of a world in which almost anything is possible between men and women.

These inner lives often contain ugly possibilities. One of the main complaints Oates faced, especially early in her career, concerns the violence—often casual, graphic, and even obsessive—that characterizes much of her writing. In a 1981 essay in *The New York Times Book Review* titled “Why Do You Write So Violently?” Oates denounced such criticism as “outright sexist” and defended the writer’s right to depict nature as she sees it. She clearly sees the United States as “a nation where violence is a fact of life”.

In the novels, such violence takes the form of assassinations, mass murders, rapes, suicides, arson, autopsies, and car accidents. In the short stories, the same events are treated with greater economy and precision, but with no less commitment to vividly depicting the truth. She does not shy away from the physical details of pain and cruelty, nor from the psychological realities that accompany them. Even when the violence in the stories is psychological violence perpetrated by one character on another, without the shedding of blood and guts, the effects are no less visceral. We can therefore say that Oates's stories are deeply felt. Violence, however, is never the end point of an Oates story. Rather, violence functions either as a catalyst or as a climax to the dramatic developments: characters undergo almost inevitable transformations through violent events, and the suddenness of the violence or the sharpness of the pain experienced or witnessed causes the characters to appreciate life more. Often the violent event or action is very secondary to the protagonist or the main action of the

story. It is often anonymous, perpetrated by unseen hands for unknown reasons, representing mysteries that will never be solved.

Behind the passion, the deep feeling and the violence of the stories is a meticulously intelligent mind that is evident when you look at the big picture, in the wide range of approaches and techniques that Oates uses in hundreds of stories. She uses a first-person, second and third persons, both male and female. Sometimes dialogue predominates; at other times there is descriptive prose. Some of the stories use imagery, tone, or rhythm and have little or no plot; others are journalistically rich in incident and sparse in stylistic embellishment. Some stories approach the length of novels; others are mere brushstrokes, a few pages, or even a single paragraph, to convey the essence of a character or dramatic situation.

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