

Ideological Frameworks in the Work of Joyce Carol Oates

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Joyce Carol Oates' writing spans across a variety of modes and genres. She writes novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and essays. Her fiction can be categorised into genres such as romance, historical, mystery, gothic, crime, family chronicle, and suspense novel. She shows a remarkable talent for pastiche allowing these various forms to meld into each other, following the rules of genre and reinventing its form simultaneously. The basis of her stories within this creative activity is an exploration and critique of ideologies. The themes she follows in exploring these ideologies are involved in unpacking American images as a way of understanding the politics and complex psychological impact behind them. Though many of her works could clearly be classified as post-modernist novels in that they are self-reflexive fictional construct rather than mimetic representation of reality, it is my assertion that Oates is attempting to discuss more serious humanistic concerns in her narrative rather than simply playing with representational modes of writing. Even when she is working in a more realist mode of writing there are elements of the fiction which work against what is traditionally considered a mimetic representation. In the preface to *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, a novel in a series whose are concerned with playing with generic modes of representation experimentally Oates writes that the novels "might be described as post-modernist in conception but thoroughly serious in execution." Her work critiques these representational formats while participating in them. Not only are readers intended to take the subject matter of the work seriously, but are meant to think more closely about the limitations of the generic forms within which we have become accustomed to thinking. The images that Oates always labours to unpack are the starting points that lead the reader through her interpretations into an understanding of history as a labyrinth of competing ideologies and ceaselessly transforming conclusions. These ideologies are always based in significant American

experiences that usually end with violent consequences and have been simplified in history's record of them. The true meaning behind these experiences are unknown and the misconceptions that arise from their misunderstanding is destructive. Hence, her continuing theme of the "mystery" and "crime" whose solution never fits very comfortably in the character or reader's mind. Sometimes these "mysteries" are very abstract, connected to ideological systems which cannot be simply summarised, and sometimes they are frighteningly serious, especially her numerous stories of rape and other violence primarily against women and children. The answers to the cause of the experiences can be simply summed up, but the layers of ideological arguments that they are packed with are staunchly irresolvable. My goal in this essay is to trace the ideological frameworks, especially on her focus on the ideology of the "American dream," that Oates unpacks through artistic methods in her fiction and how she represents these in the personal interactions of the characters she portrays.

To speak of actions or thoughts represented in works of fiction as being ideologically motivated is to generalise to a certain point on the influences that have caused them. It is also to suggest that there is some binary opposition waiting round the corner to pick them apart. It is impossible to sufficiently explain the confluent influences that filter into a specific thought or action even in the fictional world where all these are authoritatively determined. As Terry Eagleton writes, "To see ideology as a kind of collective symbolic self-expression is not yet to see it in relational or conflictive terms." (1996, 29) It is not possible to consider singular thoughts or actions to only represent one body of thought. However, it is useful to trace possible lines of ideologies that motivate them to see how they work with and against each other. The benefit of exploring representations of ideology in fiction is that the artistic method involved can refocus bodies of ideas that have generated complacent

understandings by having no context to contain them. Rather than consider that the author wrote a story in accordance with a certain polemic, I think it is more useful to discuss how the author creates stories in a style that reveals unexplored avenues of ideologies frequently simplified by narrow definitions. The way in which ideology work in Oates' fiction is to encourage the reader to take a look at a certain situation where specific reactions between characters occur because they are motivated by several ideological frameworks working at once. The reader is prompted by Oates' representation of the occurrence to see that these ideological classifications are frequently based on assumptions and through these assumptions "crimes" which constantly occur are not only left unsolved but repressed and perpetuated. Xavier Kilgarvan ruminates on the nature of crime in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*:

Xavier apologized for the sinister influence attributed to him; yet quietly observed that all persons, no matter their goodness and the innate purity of their hearts, must realize that 'crime' is scarcely a random and isolated phenomenon in life, but one which parallels them, -and is, alas, often contiguous with them. 'True the results are commonly hidden away in the "Devil's Half-Acres" of the world,' Xavier observed, 'but the origins, -ah, the origins are often far closer to home!' (1984, 193)

The crimes that occur in the personal interactions between people are based upon the misunderstanding between two unrealised ideological drives. It is the job of the reader to try to understand the politics behind the representation that Oates lays out.

In any given scene of Oates' fiction there are several layers ideological arguments in play. The third person narration moves between an intimacy with the characters, sometimes lapsing into a stream of consciousness of the character, and a detached observation that shows holes in the arguments discussed while explaining the important connection they have with a character's being. The scenes are frequently written with character motivations that the reader is clued into, but the other characters are unaware much like in a crime novel. Consider the following

passage from *American Appetites* taking place at a dinner table during a birthday celebration with a group of people:

The discussion of crime, violence, police, et cetera, still continues; Glynnis hears herself say, quite feelingly, in response to a question, 'Yes, I still have nightmares about it. I don't know if what they did was really harassment,' Malcolm says-'but it made me realize how vulnerable we are, how helpless, in a house like this-in any of our houses, I suppose-people like us who don't own weapons, and don't want to own weapons. I suppose you could say,' Glynnis continues, pleased at her own eloquence at this table of articulate and assertive people, who frequently interrupt one another in their eagerness to speak, 'that, in an equation in which others are assailants, people like us are inevitably victims.' (1989, 57-58)

A middle class woman who, while trying to maintain a certain image for her company of the susceptibility for people of gentility to be victimised, notes the distance felt between herself and the speech she is giving. Before this speech she ruminates on her short affair with a man at the table and while making the speech she thinks her husband is in their bedroom trying to call a woman who she guesses is his lover. This assumption she makes proves to be a fatal mistake. The social norms of the occasion act like a house around her, waiting to be intruded upon by a criminal action. The question of who is the assailant and who is the victim is blurred. There is also a hypocrisy suggested of people who profess themselves to be gentle. As the conversation continues the argument perpetuates into an endless victim's rant:

This provides Vincent Hawley and Meika Cassity, who do not, they declare, want to be victims; what does Glynnis mean, *people like us?* But Roberta agrees with Glynnis; and so does, perhaps too somberly, white-haired Elizabeth Kuhn, who says that there must inevitably be situations, in human society-'in decent civilized society'-in which one simply cannot fight back, even to save one's life; one cannot match evil with evil. And Amos, her husband, rather pointedly disagrees with her; and Denis supports Amos's position; and Meika Cassity interjects a remark or two, closing her pretty beringed hands into fists and raising them aloft: 'I intend to resist to the death.' And they laugh, but the subject, even then, is not, to Glynnis's annoyance, dropped; for Elizabeth, dogged in her Quaker idealism, has more to say; and Sonia Hawley, it turns out, was once, as a child, molested-'And not by a relative, either: by an older boy at school'-and Leonard Oppenheim, and Paul Owen, whose luggage was stolen on a recent trip to India, have a great deal to say; and Ian can be passionate on the subject. And so it goes on. (1989, 58)

The argument, which began in an old American debate on the right to bear arms and defend oneself, has spiralled down into a clamorous public confession of general victimisation. The need to defend themselves that they vehemently assert their entitlement to turns more into a refusal to let their social images be violated. Their arguments are reinforced by the objections of others in the group rather than expanded. The judgements they feel entitled to cast are part of the comfort of being contained within a close social group. Oates shows through scenes such as this that ideological drives can be more tightly contained in their critiques rather than allowing their contradictions to be untangled.

Oates' usual method for portraying ideological frameworks is to write of dramatic events in her stories. This is sometime done with hindsight in which the character's deliberation is overshadowed by the interpretations that the characters place upon them. Within these interpretations the characters reveal their primary ideological drives and the positive and negative aspects of them. At times when an event is portrayed in the present, it is built around a jumble of conflicting emotions that make it unintelligible. For instance, in *Mysteries of Winterthurn* a murder which the reader has already been informed will happen is portrayed where a mother is being attacked in the night while her baby is killed:

Close about her were fluttering wings, and high-pitched anxious cries, and a tumult of flesh,-ruddy and creamy pale, and starkly white; on all sides mouths, sucking lips, bared teeth; eyes that winked and glittered. *O Mother: cruel Mother! We have waited so long!* Abigail drew breath to scream but could not utter a sound, for, of a sudden, the babe's gums grew teeth, of a remarkable sharpness, which fastened in her flesh and could not be shaken away. (1984, 27)

The horrific detail of this attack creates a haunting picture atop the surreal circumstances of the event. A traditional detective novel would continue on to give clues throughout the novel to explain the reasons for this event in realistic terms, but Oates' reenvisionment of the form allows the reader to see that the crime was in fact

the result of a restrictive patriarchal ideology. Oates lays her own clues throughout the novel, but they are only ones that only prod metaphysical questions to be asked by the reader.

The babies which emerge from the fantastic Trompe L'oeil in the bed chamber at Glen Mawr Manor attack out of revenge for their death. The reader must piece together the mystery of their deaths. The deaths were probably due to the suppression of an incestuous relationship between the late proprietor Judge Kilgarvan and his daughter Georgina. This mystery, which is never brought out into the open, is covered by family shame and the drive to achieve a state of normality despite horrific circumstances. As Joanne Creighton writes of the story, "Georgina must kill her children in order to preserve the appearance of domestic normality in the patriarchal household, just as she must kill in herself and pretend to normal selfhood." (1992, 50) As the case often is in society, judgement upon any crime is biased and Judge Kilgarvan who instigates the crimes would rather perpetuate them rather than recognise a fault in his own patriarchal line of thought. Through backtracking these mysteries and the effects they had upon the victims the reader must remember the "editor's" statement in the preface to the mysteries:

it might be considered that there is such a phenomenon as *soul-murder*, of as great a moral harm as murder of the body: in which case, one, or perhaps two, or even three, additional 'deaths' might be acknowledged. (1984, 4)

The conception that the repercussions of crime are not always physically evident is an important idea to be considered in Oates' other more "realistic" fiction where the crimes referred to are at times against people who are unscathed upon the surface, but show a considerable amount of mental and spiritual damage in the narrative. Though this crime is presented in the present time, its roots lie in previous crimes that are

unmentionable because of the structure of the community's ideological basis and the suppression that can arise out of the tightly knit domesticity of the family.

The same sense of "crime" that is passively accepted or overlooked because of its domestic condition is broadened in Oates' family saga *Bellefleur*. Here, families gossip, stories and jokes initiate the transformation into a non-human and fantastic sense of reality. The lives of the family members that are interpreted by each other are changed through the imagination of the individual narrating it: "(for Bellefleurs, despite their affection for Hepatica, could not resist jests of a course nature; and such jests – as the men readily admitted – required a certain distortion of human reality)." (1980, 280) The distortion tries to imaginatively recreate situations with an edge drawn by personal motives illuminating the conflicting ideological bases by which the various members of the family over multiple generations live. Each of the family members has their own way of interpreting the "American dream" and in the execution of these interpretations they find conflicts between the other members of the family. Creighton summarises the two primary motives of the American dream Oates represents:

At the heart of the American dream is the quest for both material and spiritual fulfillment-two goals that are not always complementary. Bellefleurs epitomize and dramatize the dualities at the heart of the American dream and the American character. (1992, 39)

By inhabiting these ideological goals of the "American dream" the family members dramatically represent the causes by which they are never satisfactorily fulfilled. These ideological elements of the "American dream" are transposed into gothic renderings of events between the characters. The monstrous spectres that work their way into the Bellefleur's reality are the psychologically real elements of the character's conflicts.

This artistic method in *Bellefleur*, like that in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, causes the reader to read the novel under the same generic rules of what would traditionally constitute a family saga but through a different “prismatic lens” as Oates terms it, that is a late 20th century sensibility. From this standpoint and through Oates’ artistic construction readers are able to understand the layers of racism, misogyny and classism at work in the interactions of the characters. The novel does not try to render themes in any specific realistic sense but dramatise the dualities between the ideologies of the characters. John Gardner’s review of the novel, which tries somehow to emphatically praise and patronisingly denigrate the work simultaneously, tries to catergize the novel as a strictly symbolic one:

Miss Oates believes in these legendary characters only as symbols and the problem is that they are not symbols of the same class as those she has been using for years... Abandoning verisimilitude for a different mode (the willing suspension of disbelief), she loses her ability to startle us with sudden nightmare. Still the tale is sometimes thrilling... The book has most of the familiar Oates weaknesses: the panting, melodramatic style she too often allows herself; the heavy, heavy symbolism; and occasional esthetic miscalculations that perhaps come from thinking too subtly, forgetting that first of all a story must be a completely persuasive lie. (1987, 100-101)

Gardner reproaches the novel for its more fantastic use of symbols and considers that Oates is a strictly realist writer trying to deal with contemporary themes in a category of postmodernism. The difficulty is that Oates is dealing with themes that are contemporary, but caused by historical influences. In her reimagining of 19th century America she is inserting the monstrous elements of the past where they truly belong in a similar fashion to which Angela Carter did in her fiction. As Oates states in an interview with Lucinda Franks concerning *Bellefleur*:

‘I developed some theories about 19th-century Gothicism while writing the novel. Using the werewolf, for instance, is a way of writing about an emotional obsession turning into a kind of animal.’ (1989, 92)

She uses writing styles to dramatically represent the themes with which she is working. From this perspective, the fantastic elements of the novel are more real than fictitious.

The themes that Oates focuses on are usually built out of a significant event in America. The artistic way in which her themes are represented are created out of an inspiration by an event that Oates reads in a newspaper or a photo she sees. From these she plots out an alternative fictional history and story of the event. As Oates states in an interview with Joe David Bellamy, "I am interested in formal experimentation, yes, but generally this grows out of a certain plot. The form and the style seem naturally suited to the story that has to be told." (1989, 24) The artistic rendering is built out of a need to provide an alternative point of view. The events chosen by Oates have been portrayed in a certain way in the media. The public's connection between media events and real life are skewed because of the nature of the medium whose political agendas may interfere with the event's representation. Oates reinterprets the event on an artist and emotional level. As John Alfred Avant discusses in an article based on an interview with Oates,

Do With Me What You Will has its prototypes in real life. She recently became interested in a Detroit court case in which a judge sentenced a young White Panther to 15 years for possessing a marijuana cigarette—a charge that many people thought was trumped up... 'The law,' she says, 'is our hope.' Later she elaborated: 'A transformation of society is possible not through a *rejection* of Law, and civilization, but through a humanization of Law; we must absorb all the risks and outrages of technology into us, and then move upward to the next level. (1989, 30)

The novels Oates write are an attempt to draw these American experiences from a different perspective in order to consider the competing ideologies that lie behind them. Through her artistic creations readers are meant to infer that these events must be reimagined in order to be understood from a personal perspective.

Oates' symbolic representation of American ideology extends into the lengthy detailed descriptions she creates in her stories. These details of the character's lives and surroundings reflect the way they wish to physical create themselves. They represent the things by which the characters chose to build their own conception of reality. G F Waller considers the significance of the detail:

Oates's America is built up as a reverberating symbolic structure from such material commonplaces as highways, automobiles, supermarkets, shopping malls, money, cleanliness, success, marriage, motherhood, all heightened into the fabric of gothic parable. Our experience is constantly revealed as characterized by tragic gaps between word and act, ideal and reality – not in the trivial everyday sense but almost as a metaphysical principle, felt all the more strongly just because we are seekers of meaning, not merely of contentment. (1979, 30-31)

These details of existence with which the characters have surrounded themselves are choices made to characterise their image of themselves. They are symbolic of aspects in their drive toward an ideal conception of the self. The physical reality they build around themselves also invokes the ideological bases of past lives, transmuting them to the characters present lives.

In *Do With Me What You Will* there is a chapter where Elena and her husband Marvin rummage among items he's acquired for their home. One item they find is a portrait:

A life-sized portrait of a woman with a low forehead and wispy, curly bangs, skin that was too flesh-toned to be natural; a high, tight bodice of lace, slightly padded shoulders, long dark velvet sleeves that came out to the middle of the woman's small pink hands. Like Elena, she was wearing a dress that covered her all up, the chest and shoulders and arms. She was chaste but dowdy, and a thick film of dust covered her and the heavy gilt frame surrounding her. 'She looks like an American housewife dressed up as the mistress of an English country house,' Marvin said. (1973, 111)

The portrait transposes its image upon Elena and Marvin, willing his wife to fit the image of the wife he wants, connects the past to the present. The multitude of furniture which Oates lists with its tremendous past only has meaning if the characters

choose to give it or it can be put away in storage like their own histories, their past selves.

Oates identifies the determination to create a personal sense of the self as a distinctly American one, the country having been founded upon such ideas of independent conception. Her characters frequently dramatise this stubborn will for self creation as the character of Ardis:

‘We’re our own ideas, we make ourselves up; some women let men make them up, invent them, fall in love with them, they’re helpless to invent themselves... but not me, I’m nobody’s idea but my own. I know who I am.’ (1973, 72)

Ardis’ determination to be self-created leads her as the novel progresses to change her name several times. But the transformation takes place physically as well to the point where Elena scarcely ever knows when she is looking at her mother or not. She also sits down at one point to trace the names her mother has gone through, trying to track down who she actually is. Oates represents through these characters the struggle they feel necessary to create themselves apart from any foreign, especially male, conceptions of who they are. As Waller states,

For most contemporary fictionalists, Americans remain stubbornly caught up in dreams of identity and place; for Oates, ours remains a generation which still seeks ‘the absolute dream’, and as with the Puritans forsaking their history to journey to a wilderness, our dream must survive within an environment so aggressively materialistic that to assert the primacy of the unquantifiable seems necessary to end in the Manicheism which has constantly characterized American experience. (1979, 28)

The personal past that the characters work so hard to defeat is connected to a larger past that they feel must be disowned because it does not constitute the original images they carry of themselves. However, the material reality they build themselves into is based upon the ideologies of this past from which they wish to be released.

This will of self-invention is also represented in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*’s Xavier Kilgarvan who has a detective’s business card that states “I make my circumstance” quoting Emerson. This transcendental belief which professes the

supremacy of insight over experience turns against Xavier in solving the crimes because they are all connected to the home, Winterthurn, that he has expelled from his own self-created history. Xavier sense of himself is defeated by Winterthurn:

he could not fail to shake off the oppressive sense of uneasiness, mounting to dread, which commonly stirred in him at the mere thought – the mere recollection – of Winterthurn: Winterthurn being that region (in the detective’s imagination at least) that could not be comprehended, or ‘solved’! (1984, 391)

The “mysteries” which he attempts to solve there are never satisfactorily closed because they are tied to a past that he must deny in order to maintain the image he has created for himself. A reconciliation between his past self and self-created self proves impossible. The solution, paramount in for a detective piece of fiction, is not found and so Xavier leaves the profession seeking to find a new complex way of giving himself over to the vulnerability of his changing experiences.

There is a suggestion that in order to work comfortably within this ideology of the self-created personality, the characters must learn to live with a sense of multiple selves. They must accept that these multiple images of the self are distributed among others in their social environment. Marvin describes how he comfortably reconciles his many lives in *Do With Me What You Will*:

When I was a young man the energy inside me, the insomnia, the sweating, the nervous stomach, the misery if I couldn’t work for many hours a day – these things frightened me – but now I accept them all, I recognize them as a part of my personality, my self. (1972, 121)

Marvin is able to submerge his anxiety over the bad things that have happened in his past because he is able to dominate other people’s images of themselves. He interrogates them to the point where they are so uncertain of their own understanding of their experiences he can insert his own conception of their past into their heads. His special ability to do this makes him a very successful lawyer and provides another example of a man in a position in authority that can project his own interpretation of

“crime” into a judicial process for his own ends. Although Oates professes “Americans must realize that we have a wonderful system of Law in this country” (1989, Batterberry, 44), she is careful to recount in her writing that it is a male dominated judicial system. Marvin’s downfall in the novel is caused by his inability to live without Elena reflecting an ideal image of himself. The violence that occurs between people in Oates fiction occurs in people’s perceptions of each other as well as in physical reality.

This dependence upon other people to reflect the self-created personality is represented in Oates fiction as a “crime” akin to rape and murder. It constitutes an invasion of someone else and reducing their own sense of being. Oates writes of the way in which Elena’s image is publicly consumed:

It was crude and jarring, the way people registered other people. There was something violent about it, criminal, murderous. But it was exciting also, a kind of ceaseless swirl of consciousness, currents of thought, desire, in which she, Elena, was held and turned over and over and handled and loved and disliked and mutilated and set free again, untouched, unharmed. (1972, 538)

People’s minds are able to imaginatively do what they will with someone they perceive. This is similar to a theme Alain Robbe-Grillet pursued in his fiction where individuals projected their feelings outward and invested them in exterior objects. The violence involved in this exchange is palpable. Oates’ implication in uncovering the misogynistic desires behind these perceptions is that this invasion of others is caused by irreconcilable parts people feel in themselves and so they project their desires upon others. Rather than offer any ready solution to this, Oates presents in her fiction the possibility that these might be necessary aspects of human experience.

Violence is a condition of society. It is also composed of individual acts and it is these that Oates records in her work. Yet, the fact that violence will remain a part of a larger social network is something that is referred to throughout Oates’

reimagination of these violent events. As Creighton observes in connection with Oates' fiction,

We strike out in order that we may become. In a society where the instincts are so much repressed, violence may become a gesture of liberation, of purging, or self-discovery. Indeed, violence seems to be at the heart of the dream of America, as we cultivate the palpable risk, the danger of our deepest desires. (1979, 39)

Acts of violence are protestations against the lack of alignment between the American dream and the attempted physical actualisation of it. Through these acts the ideological conception may be modified.

The violence, omnipresent in Oates' fiction, is more a reflection of the general atmosphere she feels in society than any cry of victimisation such as those in the conversation I cited from *American Appetites*. The question of violence in Oates writing is well condensed in Elaine Showalter's "Portrait" of Oates:

In the seventies, Oates's work was often criticized for its violent themes and images, for scenes of riots, beatings, and murders; and reviewers wondered whether some trauma of her own was responsible for her dark vision. Oates responded in a 1981 essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, called 'Why Is Your Writing So Violent?' The question, she wrote, was 'always insulting...always ignorant...always sexist,' a question that would never be asked of a serious male artist. (1987, 139)

Critical attempts that try to connect the violence she writes with her past or personality, do so because her subject matter isn't the kind which many readers feel to be that of a traditional female novelist, writing of matters of domesticity. More practical readings observe the instances of violence in the context of the work and subject of which Oates is writing. Yet, if one needed to consider the frequency of its appearance in her work, it can be attributed to the consistent occurrences of violence in the media of America because this is the source where Oates finds the most inspiration for her subject matter.

The violence that Oates locates in a tightly contained scene of domesticity between a husband and wife in *American Appetites* seeks to locate the rupture in the

American ideology that stresses success. In a scene where Ian's psychology is considered before his marriage Oates writes,

-yet he feared her, for the very spaciousness of her spirit, all that she promised or threatened, of a life complex beyond his reckoning: a normal life, the life of the species, yet uniquely American. Marriage, children, a job, a position, property to be acquired and protected, and, in time, a place in a community: a reputation. Ian McCullough had wanted to be lost, unnamed, a Kierkegaardian casualty of faith, an existential being-in-the-making, a doomed hero of Camus, a maniac martyr like John Brown. He had studied American political history as if reading a long, lurid, clamorous novel in which self-proclaiming figures, contended, each isolated from the other yet citizens of the same enormous landscape. The American continent was large enough to absorb all, yet not so large not to be domesticated. Marry me, Ian begged, and save me. (1989, 116)

The models of existential experience are in opposition to Ian's ideology of American "success" and so he seeks to align himself with the physical details of the ideology.

The stress to achieving this is always placed on a conception of "normality" of the same kind that Ardis seeks in *Do With Me What You Will*: "It was her dream, she said, to 'live like normal people.'" (1973, 78) The possibility of achieving this is never fully satisfied because the idea of it does not transfer to any physically realised space, but the narrow criteria that are involved in its process of realisation can constrain the individuals involved to the point of suffocation. Hypocrisy could be considered an inherent characteristic of the criteria, but it must never be physically evident. Therefore, when Glynnis discovers what she thinks to be Ian's infidelity, the glass house they live in literally crashes around. The dramatic scene in which Oates builds this picture, illuminates the central ideological concepts she is trying to discuss artistically.

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 actualise it. The personal interactions between the characters in her stories are the meeting points of different interpretations

of ideologies such as this conception. The reader can interpret from this the multifarious influences that filter into ideological constructions. Oates prodigious ability to realise 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. Yet, Oates central concern in these narratives is representing the ideological subjects behind the events of her stories. If these ideological concepts are seen as central to what people characterise as their being, then Oates endeavours to discover the meaning behind them. This is the only way to come to an understanding of what may be hypothetically thought of as the self.

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