

**Joyce Carol Oates and the American South: Her Use of a Southern Style  
or  
A New York Yankee in William Faulkner's Court**

By Lockie Hunter

The defining characteristics of Southern fiction are a sense of place and home--home is a potent word for a Southerner, a deep involvement with family and ritual, a celebration of eccentricity, a strong narrative voice, themes of racial guilt and human endurance, local tradition, a sense of impending loss, a pervasive sense of humor in the face of the tragic, and an inability to leave the past behind. (Long 1)

The above definition of Southern fiction, given as part of a presentation by Hill Street Press's Judy Long for the Eighth Annual Harriette Austin Writers Conference, is echoed time and again when southern fiction is defined. These same elements are mentioned as the defining characteristics of southern fiction in the syllabi of college courses teaching the subject, in anthologies and reviews dealing with the theme and in numerous articles exploring the topic of southern writing. In addition to the above elements, a mention of the gothic, including grotesque and freakish characters, is often included in the composite definition. Given this unified definition, it is surprising that there are virtually no scholarly essays devoted to Joyce Carol Oates and her use of the southern style.

Oates, born in upstate New York, sets much of her work in the North, yet her work still has a distinctly southern essence. For the purposes of this paper southern writing will be defined as concerned with place and family, interested in the gothic and

the grotesque, engrossed with the freakish nature of life and occupied with a sense of impending or past loss. These elements are the hallmarks of the writing of Oates. It is through Oates's strong emphasis on place and family, her love of the gothic, her portrayal of freakish characters and her depiction of layered loss that one can imagine that if Oates did not have the spirit of Carson McCuller visit her regularly then she at least had a southern muse sitting upon her shoulder as she typed much of her work.

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### **Place and Family**

I tried research one summer. . . But then a peculiar thing happened. I became extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the laboratory . . . I became bewitched by the presence of the building . . . I called Harry's attention to the presence but he shrugged and went on with his work. He was absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time and place. (Percy 43)

*--Walker Percy*

Oates's emphasis on family and place, the intertwining of these elements and their important role in her character's lives is a hallmark of southern writing. In her short story, "Little Maggie: A Mystery", Oates illuminates the complex relationship between father and daughter. The narrator writes of her father, "Oh it's something to cleave your heart

through the years, your own handsome young Daddy ablaze in light..." (1). Later the narrator's daddy leaves her. "...And if babies come out of their love, how can they bear to part! Knowing how the child's heart is rended in the devouring teeth of elders" (8).

Oates is one of the few northern writers that writes well of kinship. The southern pattern of exploring adult relationships between relatives, living close to your extended family, of having adult family that you both quarrel with and celebrate with is evident in Oates's work. In her short story "So Help Me God" the tone of the cousins echo that of the sisters in Eudora Welty's short story "Why I Live at the P.O." Oates's antagonist writes "Without so much as glancing towards me Andrea picks up the receiver as if she is in her own home and not mine" (195) and then later she writes "I could wring Andrea's neck the way she's smiling, shaking her head...wish I never called her this afternoon hinting I was lonely" (196). While Welty's antagonist writes "I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy, and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again" (88).

Oates illuminates the relationship between a family and their sense of place in her most popular novel We Were the Mulvaney's which examines family and how changes within directly affect the American dream. The setting, High Point Farm, suggests the significance of home. The farm itself calls to mind the homes in the novels of Walker Percy and William Faulkner and is lavish with detail. In We Were the Mulvaney's Oates's gives us:

The gravel drive is lined with tall again spruces. Around the house are five enormous oaks and I mean enormous-the tallest is easily three times the height of the house..." (8) and "The sprawling, overgrown and

somewhat jungly farm itself, blurred at the edges as in a dream where our ever collapsing barbed wire fences trailed off into scrubby, hilly, uncultivated land.” (11)

Not only does the sheer description of Oates’s High Point Farm seem drawn from a Faulknerian landscape, but the sense of dilapidation on the farm, the overgrowth, and sprawling nature fits well in the southern heritage of place. In the description of High Point Farm, the “jungly” nature is similar to the kudzu that seizes most southern manses if not carefully cultivated. Examples of such overgrown and marginally neglected homes drawn from southern literature include Gone with the Wind’s Tara. Other fictional southern examples of place include Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County and Eudora Welty’s Natchez Trace which are etched with such precision that place becomes a character in the work. This effect mirrors Oates’s memorable High Point Farm and her towns of Paradise and Wonderland. While Oates’s fiction is primarily set in the north, it is her description of place that has a distinctly southern element. The intensity with which she describes the locale, the home, and the surroundings is one that is often missing in northern literature. In Oates’s short story “So Help Me God” the narrator notes, “In Au Sable Forks which is the center and circumference of my world everyone is acquainted with everyone else and has been so since grade school” (195). This sense of place, so intertwined with family, is unmistakably a trademark of both Oates’s fiction and southern fiction.

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### **The Gothic and the Grotesque**

...a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail. (McCullers 21-22)

---Carson McCuller speaking of southern gothic

The gothic imagination melds the sacred and the profane in startling and original ways, suggesting its close kinship with the religious imagination...(Oates 3)

---Oates speaking of gothic writing in the introduction to her novel American Gothic Tales

When discussing writers within the United States, the term gothic seems to need the prefix southern. Southern Gothic is a course taught at academies as diverse as Glasgow University and South Hampton College. A quick internet search for the phrase 'southern gothic' revealed multiple entries. They included, 'southern gothic writing', 'southern gothic literature', and 'southern gothic fiction'. There were examples of Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers. The same internet search with the phrase 'northern gothic' revealed zero results. It seems to not exist as a genre. Yet Oates's gothic novels and short stories are legendary. Her gothic works include Bellefleur, A Bloodsmoor Romance and Mysterious of Winterthurn. These novels teem with the grotesque. The mere fact that Oates writes in the gothic style, which in America is synonymous with a southern gothic style, seems to suggest her southern leaning, but there is more than that. Within these gothic tales lie a world that parallels the worlds of her southern compatriots.

Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is an excellent example of the southern gothic. In this short story he illumines the decay of the refined Southern class. In Bellefleur, Oates's gothic masterpiece, she too narrates the decay of the refined Bellefleur family.

A further connection is the use of the gothic setting. In Truman Capote's Other Voices Other Rooms he renders a marsh being "filled with luminous green logs that shine under the dark marsh water like drowned corpses" (9). This parallels Oates's own marsh setting in her novella First Love. "You enter the marsh shyly, a strange sensation like floating walking on the planks; the marsh is living, the dark rich damp soil makes an oozing, bubbling sound" (4).

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### **Freaks**

"When I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it's because we are still able to recognize one" (44).

-Flannery O'Connor

The freaks that abound in Oates's work echo the memorable freaks in southern writing. Where Eudora Welty's story collection A Curtain of Green offers a veritable cavalcade of aberrant characters, Oates offers a similar procession of misfits in her story

collection, The Collector of Hearts. But Oates's freaks are not limited to this one volume of stories. Here are just a few examples.

### **Religion**

In O'Connor's novel Wise Blood the character of Hazel Mote travels with a man named Asa who pretends to be blind, and a stolen mummy which he calls the new Jesus.

In Oates's "The Passion of Rydcie Mather", an atheist bus driver decides to kill her passengers after she speaks with a reverend.

In Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away the protagonist baptizes and ultimately drowns his uncle's retarded son.

### **Dwarfs**

In Oates' Foxfire we find a retarded dwarf being abused.

In Carson McCullers "Ballad of a Sad Café" we find a hunchback dwarf.

### **Cannibalism**

In Southern writer Cormac McCarthy's novel Outer Dark a child is born as the incestuous offspring to a brother and sister. The father is later followed by a trio of freakish beings who engage in cannibalism and grave robbing.

In Oates's Wonderland a character eats a human uterus.

### **Physical deformity**

In O'Connor's story "Good Country People", the protagonist has her wooden leg stolen.

In Oates's, Bellefleur, one character has the genitals of her unborn twin growing from her torso.

### **Arson**

In Faulkner's As I Lay Dying one of the character's attempt to cremate his mother is through burning down the barn.

In Oates's gothic novel Beasts there are recurring acts of arson.

### **Incest**

Lastly, the theme of incest is present in much southern writing, so much so that there are popular, if not ribald jokes surrounding southern incest. Within Oates's fiction, incest is surprisingly widespread. Incest is unveiled in her stories "The Blindfold", "The Daughter", "Ruth", "The Virgin in the Rose Bower" and others.

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### **Sense of loss**

We are forced back continually to an acquiescence in all that is hallucinatory and wasteful, to a rejection of all norms and gods and



dreams of "tragedy" followed by the violent loss of self that signals the start of artistic effort: an appropriation by destruction, or an assimilation into the self of a reality that cannot be named." (Oates 3)

-Joyce Carol Oates

In Oates's world the southern occupation with loss is evident everywhere. Many of her pieces are marked with a sense of loss, both physical destruction and emotional ruin.

The theme of grouped loss is evident in much of southern writing. It is so commonplace that it is even parodied in country songs. One such popular song contains the lyrics:

Well, I was drunk the day my Mom got outta prison.

And I went to pick her up in the rain.

But, before I could get to the station in my pickup truck

She got runned over by a damned old train. (Coe)

Oates's sense of disaster, although usually more subtle, is still aggregate. Much as the above song lyrics suggest, the loss in Oates's work is compounded by further loss and so on, until there is a veritable cornucopia of loss squeezed into her fiction. In her prize winning story, "You Petted Me, and I Followed You Home" the layered theme of loss is felt on multiple levels. The image of a little lost dog gives rise to another misfortune, that of the child lost to miscarriage, and finally a third potential downturn, that of a new marriage dissolving. The character Dawn stares down at the dog "feeling a sense of loss, terrible and final and irrevocable loss, not to be named" (158).

We see a loss of paradise—of wealth and prestige and pride—in her novels American Appetites, Middle Age and We Were the Mulvaneys. “But if the trial drags on, if there’s an appeal’ Ian said thoughtfully, ‘there may be some problem paying you...and I’m not going to sell the house” (“Appetites” 195). Her novel We Were Mulvaneys echoes Faulkner in its stunning decline of a once prominent family. The novel begins with “We were the Mulvaney, remember us” (3). To candidly ask if they were remembered implies a sense of diminishment. A later chapter is even titled “hard reckoning” (353). Such a southern utterance!

We see loss of life in numerous of her works. Death is present in Oates’s short stories of “Girl with the Blackened Eye” and “Heat” as well as in her novels Zombie, and Black Water and many others stories, novels, plays, and poems. Oates depicts so many casualties in her oeuvre that in 1971 a “New York Times Review” of her work by Geoffrey Wolff was titled, “Miss Oates Loves to Splash Blood on Us” (1 Wolff). It should also be noted that a 1955 Time Magazine book review once dubbed Flannery O’Connor, “Ferocious Flannery”.

We witness a loss of innocence in Oates’s novella, Rape: a love story and in her short stories “Where Are You Going Where Have You Been”, and “Smother”. In “Smother” the character Alva copes with her memoirs of watching a baby being smothered by forgetting, which is itself a form of loss. “Amnesia is the paralyzed limb into which one day, one hour, feeling may suddenly begin to flow” (207).

Lastly we see a loss of time in her novel Middle Age. “A year vanished. Where?” (457).



Certainly if one examines the southern elements outlined in this paper they show Oates to undoubtedly be a candidate for the southern canon. However, according to writer Jerry Leath Mills:

My survey of around thirty prominent twentieth-century southern authors has led me to conclude, without fear of refutation, that there is indeed a single, simple, litmus-like test for the quality of southernness in literature... The test is: *Is there a dead mule in it?* As we shall see, the presence of one or more specimens of *Equus caballus x asinus (defunctus)* constitutes the truly catalytic element, the straw that stirs the strong and heady julep of literary tradition in the American South. (15)

So the question must be begged. Did Joyce Carol Oates despoil any mules? In her collection of stories titled The Assignation the following passage is found:

But Buddy was funny, sort of: one night sitting around the kitchen drinking beer and eating cold pizza this long wild story about a mule corpse floating in some creek, floating and bobbing and trapped under a bridge, and one of Buddy's cousins got him to dive in the water and Buddy slammed right through the corpse! (24-25)

Add the presence of the ubiquitous dead mule and this final element cements Joyce Carol Oates's standing as an honorary southern woman of letters.

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