
***Refusal and Transgression
in
Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction***

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Preface

In March of 1986 Elaine Showalter published an article in *Ms.* magazine entitled "My Friend, Joyce Carol Oates." More than a personal account, the essay also claims Oates as a friend of the feminist movement: "despite the series of important books on female experience she has written especially during this decade, Oates has never had the acknowledgment from feminist readers and critics that she deserves" (44). *Refusal and Transgression* is intended to theorize a basis for the well-deserved feminist appreciation of Oates' valuable oeuvre.

Jonathan Culler hypothesizes several key "moments" in feminist literary criticism. The first assumes that a reader's experience is continuous with a text and, therefore, "takes considerable interest in the situations and psychology of female characters, investigating attitudes to women or the 'images of women' in the works of an author, a genre, or a period" (46). Proceeding from this postulate, much early feminist consideration condemned Oates for presenting disappointing portraits of women. Oates' first critics described her moving portrayal of female victims, the "unliberated women" of Joyce Carol Oates, in Joanne Creighton's influential phrase, without observing her corresponding tactics of liberation. My study makes use of significant changes in the methods and objectives of more recent feminist theory and the theoretical practice of post-structuralism, Marxism, and psychology to discover in Joyce Carol Oates' fiction of the American family systematic strategies of resistance.

In the introduction to a 1983 volume of essays in women's history, Judith Newton, Mary P. Ryan, and Judith R. Walkowitz note an important methodological shift from an "earlier focus on victimization" toward an

effort to reconceptualize “the very nature and locus of power” (7). Oates’ *oeuvre*, comprised in large measure of the narratives of sons and daughters, is an extended meditation on the institution of the family as the “locus” of the definition and dissemination of social and economic power through the gendered psychological experience of its members. Materialist-feminist criticism, which takes as its focus, according to Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt in their 1987 *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, “not the tale of individual and inevitable suffering, but a story of struggle and relations of power” (xv), furnishes a basis for an approach to the analysis of the power dynamics of Oates’ domestic fiction.

Central to such criticism is the examination of ideology, “a structure of perception that helps maintain a particular set of social and economic relations at a particular juncture in history” (xxii). For otherwise, as Josephine Donovan explained in 1989, “unexamined ideologies . . . function as fate” (xiii). Feminist criticism is able to examine the operation of ideology, according to Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn in their 1985 survey of feminist scholarship, through attention to the “partial truths and contradictions that ideology masks” (22). The striking contradictions at the heart of Oates’ fiction are registered in the vigorous attempts of her daughters and sons, repeated and refined from work to work in serial gestures of what I am calling *refusal* and *transgression*, to evade or redefine their gendered fates, and in the dialectic struggle of the text itself against the codes that support it through the projection of what I define as Oates’ *feminist unconscious* and its narrative agent, the recurrent figure of the *transgressive other*.

Ideology in the Althusserian sense developed in this study refers to the acceptance of a single and restrictive story, one familiar fiction which fails to tell the unknown and multiple stories contained in a vast “unconscious” of possible versions. The limiting story that determines Oates’ texts is the patriarchal gender system imposed by the family. But the sub-text of Oates’ fiction is to be found in the narrative strategies, which resist and attempt to subvert that system.

In her 1982 preface to *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Elizabeth Abel pointed out that women’s writing may mount a challenge from within patriarchal discourse through acts of “revision, appropriation, and subversion” (2). Joyce Carol Oates’ domestic fiction—narratives that treat the characters, the relations, and the frequently extreme emotional experiences of the modern family—actively controverts the gender assumptions upon which that family is structured through the revision and appropriation of specific literary forms and through the general patterns of narrative subversion I describe as *refusal* and *transgression*. In so doing, Oates’ texts

interrogate the social and economic systems of power in which the family participates.

A criticism with this political intent will, in Donovan's view, consider the text as a dialectic between its "negative" subversion of dominant ideology and its "positive" aspiration. Citing Fredric Jameson, Donovan describes the "positive" objective of the feminist critic as identifying the "text's liberatory function" and delineating its "utopian horizon" (xvii). While Oates' works challenge the detrimental operation of gender ideology in the family, they also struggle to "solve" the gendered contradictions they uncover and to redefine the family as a utopian model of social cooperation.

Finally, feminist criticism, as Newton and Rosenfelt characterize it, will subsume to its task the productive insights of many related disciplines, and my literary investigation of the refusals and transgressions of Oates' oeuvre makes use of the diverse scholarship of post-structuralism, Marxism, and psychology, as well as feminism. Although it was certainly initially important to catalogue and excoriate the female victimization so richly implied in women's fiction, it is now necessary to employ and extend a methodology for the analysis of the corollary strategies of active resistance and redefinition in which that fiction is also engaged. In addition to securing for Joyce Carol Oates the feminist recognition her work clearly deserves, this study is intended as a contribution to the development of a contemporary critical practice which can better account for the revolutionary potential of women's fiction.

But Oates' work has been examined from perspectives other than that of feminism. The general problem with that criticism to date, however, is a failure to discern and describe an underlying structure uniting the diverse plots, characters, styles, and genres of her prodigious oeuvre. This book maintains that family, power, and resistance, concepts interacting throughout Oates' fiction, provide the key to understanding the genesis, energy, and meaning of her works. Briefly, the complicated stories of various characters in many different settings typically take place in the context of family relationships, and since the institution of the family directly shapes individual perception of the social and financial forces of the greater world, Oates' disturbing portrayals of troubled families can and do address complex issues of power in contemporary society—economic dislocation, gender inequity, and violence—as they are experienced in intimate relationships. And if plot in Oates' work customarily deals with the family, theme always concerns complicated issues of personal, familial, and public power. Oates' characteristic stance towards the plot of family and

the theme of power is challenging, interrogative, even revolutionary resistance.

The patriarchal family of Oates' fiction is more than an arrangement of individuals; it is a system for the allocation and definition of power. The father, whose role as financial provider gives him access to the social sources of power in economic or ideological institutions, has primary responsibility for imposing the power experienced by other family members, and that experience is further regulated by gender. Traditionally, the father's power provides the resources for adequate nurture by the mother, the son grows up to replicate his father's power, and the daughter assumes her mother's complementary supportive function. The difficulty, as Oates' fiction presents it, is that this traditional arrangement is not working. Historical shifts in the larger social and economic world, which are mostly unrecognized in the circumscribed spheres of individual characters, have invalidated the fathers' traditional interpretations of their own power, and as a result of the deficiency of the fathers' power, dependent mothers are usually inadequately nurturant and children constantly struggle against the inappropriate gender expectations fostered by their experience in traditional families. The narratives of this struggle by the sons and daughters of Oates' fiction develop in marked patterns of resistance which I define as refusal and transgression. Through their efforts to refuse the models implied by the lives of same-sex parents and through the even more provocative challenges implied by transgressive relations with parents of the opposite sex, Oates' young protagonists enact a trenchant critique of the American family and of the society which has formed it.

Contents

Preface	xi
Introduction: Family, Power, Resistance	1
1. Mothers and Fathers: The Demotion of the Ideal	17
2. Mothers and Daughters: The Refusal of Innocence	33
3. Brothers and Sisters: The Refusal of Substitute Relation	57
4. Fathers and Sons: The Refusal of Violence	73
5. Transgression I: Mother-Son Romance	91
6. Transgression II: Father-Daughter Incest	111
7. The Feminist Unconscious	125
8. The Transgressive Other	143
Notes	155
References	161
Index	169

Introduction: Family, Power, Resistance

Family. Power. Resistance. These terms are the key to understanding the urgency and the effectiveness of Joyce Carol Oates' fiction. At last count, she was the author of twenty-six novels. A recent collection of interviews with the author lists her collected work as eighty-seven volumes (Milazzo v), and the 1986 comprehensive bibliography cites 397 separate short stories (Lercangée 7–45). This vast oeuvre contains an impressive variety of characters with at least one thing in common: the men, women, adolescents, children, rebels, martyrs, members of the professions and the unemployed, would-be saints and definite sinners, the wooden Virgin and the Oriental goddess of love who appear and come to life in her pages are most often presented in the context of family relationship.

Oates' critics frequently insist that her fiction centers on repetitive plots and central obsessions.¹ She herself remarks, "Everything is related. If it wouldn't alarm me, I'd someday go back through all my writing and note how the obsessions come and go horizontally (a single psychological 'plot' worked out in a story, a play, poems, parts of novels)" ("Transformations of Self" 50). That obsessive plot is, I believe, the story of the American family, not its nostalgic resurrection but its painful adjustments to a changing world.

In Oates' fiction we minutely observe the modern family from the period of the Depression to the present in the throes of change. Mediating as it does between the individual and society, the family is affected by historical change slowly but radically. Although the family is the social institution "most resistant to change," according to Christopher Lasch, any alteration

in its size, emotional arrangement, or relation to society "must have enormous impact on the development of personality." And "changes in character structure, in turn, accompany or underlie changes in economic and political life" (4). Oates' domestic fiction is concerned with both of these types of change. Especially in her early work, economic changes in the larger world affect families in such a way as to change individuals, but the correlative project throughout has been to define individual resistance to family ideology, which may in turn contribute to the restructuring of the social world.

Characters in Oates' fiction will understand *family* to refer to the traditional standard—breadwinning father, nurturing mother, and siblings of assorted gender—but the reader of Oates' fiction will observe another pattern frequently undermining the first. The father, and perhaps even his father if the family is extended, may be brutal, weak, financially inadequate or absent, whereas the mother or grandmother may provide inadequate or irrelevant care to her children. And as these children approach adulthood they will energetically attempt to evade the roles modeled by their parents' lives. But Oates is not merely depicting dysfunctional families; the dysfunctional relationships she presents serve to question expectations about the operation of family structure.

The concept of power in Oates' work extends from the possibility of global warfare to the opportunity for personal agency,² but at whatever level it is examined it is consistently marked by the failure of the father as its agent and the harmful consequences to other family members. Oates' domestic relationships, then, both articulate and challenge contemporary definitions of power mediated through the gender system of the patriarchal family. In brief, if the plot of Oates' fiction centers on the modern family, its theme questions the contemporary meaning of power. As I shall argue, the failure of ideal power relations in Oates' families reveals power and nurturance as the exclusive attributes of father and mother to be an anachronistic social adaptation resulting in a central opposition that produces impotence and isolation as the respective characteristics of daughters and sons. The experience of these restrictions provokes the patterns of resistance I define as refusal and transgression.

Yet Oates' characteristic strategies of resistance have been too often inadequately understood. Her introduction to the 1981 critical collection *Contraries* states that "the seven essays in this volume, written over a period of approximately twenty years . . . were originally stimulated by feelings of opposition, and in one or two cases, a deep and passionate revulsion" (viii). The philosophic basis in creative "opposition" specified here in Oates' criticism has, however, long been a source of confusion in

her fiction. In 1979 Linda Wagner surveyed the striking variation in critical response to Oates' works (xxiii–xxiv) and Joanne Creighton noted that readers have often been unable to relate the deterministic expectations invoked by Oates' naturalistic techniques to the "modernistic formulation" of her "visionary conception" (*Joyce Carol Oates* 149, 144). This seeming discrepancy, which marred Oates' accomplishment for Creighton in 1979, may be better understood with reference to Catherine Belsey's 1980 modalities of the "declarative" and "interrogative" text.

Belsey's formulations grow out of post-structuralist and deconstructive literary theory, which, like Oates' work, discovers virtue in contradiction. Using naturalistic description, the declarative text masks its fictivity and tends toward comfortable closure, thereby endorsing the "hierarchy of discourses" of its own culture (92), whereas the interrogative text, in contrast, "disrupts the unity of the reader" (91) by employing the author as a locus of question and contradiction. Oates' fiction employs both practices. Typically declarative in its descriptive evocation of the textures of an actual world, it also unfolds in narrative patterns of resistance and consistently decenters the reader by imposing the discomfort of incomplete closure. Oates' texts also formally question a number of romantic assumptions and a variety of generic practices that reinforce dominant ideology.

Because of this dual perspective, in order to appreciate Joyce Carol Oates' fiction, the reader must heed the dialectic struggle between the text's declarative evocation of what is and its interrogative challenge in the service of what might be. Feminism, through its careful analysis of women's experience and its thoughtful articulation of alternative possibility, can provide the discursive basis for such an encounter. Although Oates rejects the limitation of feminist designation³ and despite frequent claims that her work has been anti-feminist,⁴ to read her family fiction in the post-structural double light of revealing contradiction discloses an *oeuvre* exhaustively engaged in testing the restrictions imposed by gendered power arrangements. And to read Oates' work in this way is to read it as feminist revolution in the making.

POWER AND THE FAMILY

In the title story of Joyce Carol Oates' 1984 collection, the central character remarks "that the family is a vanishing animal in the United States, doomed to extinction" (*Last Days* 22), a comment that exaggerates the preoccupation of Oates' fiction from the outset: the family—not its actual demise but its damaged and diminished effectiveness. Consider the

first story in her first collection of stories as an illustration of the declining effectiveness of the family intersected by the issues of power and resistance. In "Swamps," the Grandfather, who inhabits a "log cabin," (*By the North Gate* 13) is a character out of history tinged by legend. It is the Grandfather's responsibility to transmit to his seven-year-old grandson his own positive values: "This-here is a damn good world, a *god*-damn good world, it's all you got an' you better pay attention to it" (17). But the Grandfather's world has failed. The old man's son, forced to abandon farming the unprofitable land for work in the gypsum mill, is "sick of gypsum dust in his lungs, sick of the foreman, sick of working underground, sick of the cheese sandwiches he carried for lunch everyday; he was sick of life" (13).

Between these clashing worldviews wanders a strange young girl, confused, pregnant, and alone. Through the birth of her child traditional values are to be validated, the sanctity of the family is to be reconstituted. The weakening old man assumes responsibility for the expectant mother; by becoming Joseph to her Mary he resumes heroic stature, and on the night of the birth the boy witnesses a resurrection of joy even in his own world-weary father. But in the clear light of the day after this birth and rebirth, the family finds the grandfather bruised and unconscious. The girl has bashed him with a board and run away. The boy discovers the infant drowned in a basin of the sewage-polluted water from the creek that flows beside the old man's junk-strewn cabin. If ever a story demonstrated the contradiction between family ideology and family reality, that story is "Swamps."

In 1911 the traditional functions of the family were described as

the management of the household, the reproduction, rearing and education of children, the control of population growth and of genetic lines, the development of sociableness, the care of the sick and elderly, the accumulation and hereditary transmission of capital and other property, as well as the determination of choice of occupation.⁵

But in "Swamps" the family fails demonstrably at all these functions. Let us briefly consider the points in order.

The boy lives with his mother and father and sister in a traditional and orderly household, as is apparent in the efficiency of the mother's kitchen. But the condition of the shadow household of the nearly senile old man and the crazed girl undercuts this version. The grandfather does not even possess the rudiments necessary for birth, for family continuity: " 'I'm

needin' a good clean knife, for one thing,' he said apologetically. . . . 'An' some towels or so...a sheet, maybe. . . . For when she's due' " (21).⁶

The baby's death and the boy's confusion controverts the family's central function in the rearing and education of children. The unknown and husbandless girl denies family control of "population growth" along predictable "genetic lines." The grandfather's attempt to aid the unfortunate girl provides a negative lesson in "sociableness" for the boy. The mother's attempt to care for the Grandfather is kindly but largely ineffectual. The legitimate capital acquisitions of the family have been reduced to uncultivated land and a junk-filled cabin, worthless to the father and the boy who follows him, and certainly the father's example shows that the "choice of occupation" has become an accident of the economy rather than a family prerogative.

What, then, does the family do? The answer lies in the one birthright with which the Grandfather may endow the boy—an orientation toward authority. The mother respects the old man's "prickly independence. 'You must be like your grandfather,' she would whisper to the little boy. 'When you grow up. Not now, but when you grow up' " (12).

Independence and its opposite term *submission* are, according to Max Horkheimer, both useful responses to authority. The sources of these contradictory responses are varying economic conditions of a society mediated through its institutions, especially the family:

The growing child experiences the influence of reality according as the latter is reflected in the mirror of the family circle. The family, as one of the most formative agencies, sees to it that the kind of human character emerges which social life requires and gives this human being in great measure the indispensable adaptability for a specific authority-oriented conduct on which the existence [of his own social order] depends. (98)

This education in authority-orientation occurs in Western society as a seemingly natural consequence of the patriarchal structure of the family: "with its two-fold foundation in the father's economic position and his physical strength with its legal backing" (107). "Swamps," however, is a story of patriarchy that splits, and thereby qualifies, Horkheimer's archetypal father as a source of unproblematic adaptation to authority. The power of the boy's father rests on his financial support of the family, and it is evident that the family's economic survival in this story depends on his ability to submit to the regimentation of the factory. Indeed, the father's depression is at least partly a result of the confusing and inappropriate orientation he received from his own father, who still retains remnants of

the legal and physical strength that supported an independence appropriate to the Grandfather's pioneer background. As a result of these divergent patriarchal models, the boy's inadequate alternatives vacillate between stifling submission and ineffectual independence.

From the beginning, Oates' fiction presents in the often split figure of the father the concept of power undergoing economically determined change. The dislocation from the smallholding to the factory has resulted in a crisis in traditional definitions. As this story illustrates, the concept of power in Oates' works is the product of complex mediation. And although it is derived primarily from the father's problematic adaptation to poorly understood economic authority, it is further complicated by insertion into gender ideology.

As an instance of ideological complexity, the boy must not only make sense of the two different modes of his father and Grandfather, but he must try, as well, to resolve two grandfathers, the mythic and the actual. The first emerges during visits with Old Hamp. The two aged cronies share afternoons of fishing, drinking, and leisurely reminiscence that always culminate in their clumsy attempts to shave one another with an old straight razor, "grinning with blood running in glistening streams down their faces" (15). At these moments, the Grandfather embodies pure, primitive patriarchal power: "'You, there, boy!' he would yell drunkenly, 'You want me to cut out your gizzard for you?'" (16). Yet the boy is unable to reconcile this primal figure with the "trembling old man who whined about being robbed" (27) at the end of the story. This emphasis on the boy's bewilderment indicates that Oates' focus is not the realistic analysis of economic forces that have dislocated the concept of power, which her works characteristically relegate to symbolic setting—the cabin and the gypsum mill of this story, the Eden County, Detroit, or Fernwood of her novels. Rather, her concern is with the effect of that dislocation.

The problem of gender ideology is demonstrated by the reactions of the young man and the young woman of the story. The stock figure of the boy registers the confusing reorientation to authority in the traditional family, whereas the violent resistance of the innovative character, the pregnant girl, reflects the extent to which this reorientation may challenge the structure of the family. When the Grandfather and the boy find her at the creek bank, she has been swearing at school children, throwing bits of dried mud to frighten them away: "You an' them goddam kids go away and let me be. I got a right to sit here all I want" (18). The girl's cantankerous independence forges an immediate bond with the Grandfather, so he attempts to solve the problems of each of them traditionally, by

taking the girl into his home and assuming paternal responsibility for her delivery.

Horkheimer suggests two roles for a woman. She may provide maternal love, and she may strengthen the man's orientation to authority by "chain-ing" him to "the status quo" (118, 120). The nurturant mother in the story enacts the first role, whereas the sister, whom the Grandfather reproaches for a conventionality that precludes humane concern, performs the second. But the defiant girl rejects both traditional feminine definitions. She luridly refuses the maternal role, and she violently transgresses the patriarchal status quo represented by the legitimation inherent in the proffered protection of the Grandfather.

At its inception "Swamps" shadows forth characteristic concerns that Joyce Carol Oates will develop and refine throughout her career: the focus on a point of change, the exploration of modes and definitions of power, the inquiry into the meaning of gender, the concentration on the family as it is constituted by and constitutes social experience, and the revolutionary challenge evident in complex patterns of refusal and transgression, which it is my purpose here to set forth.

In contrast to Horkheimer's theory of adaptive masculine alternatives, the ideology of gender operating in Oates' fiction prescribes independence as appropriate orientation to authority for the male and submission for the female, but the changing social and economic conditions in "Swamps" effect a challenge to this rigid formula. The boy must question his assignment, whereas the girl subverts hers. In Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," the hero can choose to fish the swamp on another day; Oates' family must find new ways to live within it.

RESISTANCE AND THE FAMILY

The work of Fredric Jameson provides a convenient means of conceptualizing Oates' varied presentations of family relations as interrogation of traditional ideology. According to Jameson, all forms of power and status are "based ultimately on gender hierarchy and on the building block of the family unit," a conjoined base providing the "juncture" between Marxism and feminism: "the moment at which the feminist project and the Marxist and socialist project meet and face the same dilemma: how to imagine Utopia" ("Cognitive Mapping" 355). To consider the institution of the family, therefore, is to raise issues of both class and gender. And in such a consideration, the methods of Jameson's literary interpretation of class relations may be productively applied to feminist analysis of gender relations.