Chapter II
Joyce Carol Oates

(Born: 1938)
ABBREVIATIONS.

1. WF : With Shuddering Fall.
5. DWM : Do With Me What You Will.
Chapter II

Joyce Carol Oates is a very prolific contemporary woman writer in the United States today. Her thematic concerns are wide and universal. The immensities and variety of her creative and critical writings make it difficult to put her under any specific category of writing. “She is an artist in the Dostoevsky-Balzac-Faulkner mode and believes in the writer’s responsibility to draw a culture and its people, to present its discrete components so that the reader might gradually come to understand some of the mystery that life at its most complex includes.”¹ In an interview she has very clearly admitted that she is not a feminist though she has a great concern for feminists and their stance: “I am very sympathetic with most of the aims of feminism, but cannot write feminist literature because it is too narrow, too limited. I am equally sympathetic with male characters as with female. … an unfortunate situation, but one which I cannot help.”² Oates has talked about her ambition to get the whole world into a book. She believes that the job of the writer is to act as the conscience of his race. Thus in her writings Oates attempts to explore and analyze the complexities of contemporary society in all its facets. The women’s issues inevitably constitute an important part of her exploration of the total social scenario. Eileen Teper Bender has rightly pointed out that:

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It may seem more radical to consider Oates a literary feminist. As critic and artist, Oates certainly bears an interesting relation to the contemporary women’s moment. She has been subject to accusatory fire from some feminist critics for her comments on androgyny and the portrait of a modern woman awakened by the forces of a heterosexual embrace in her novel Do With Me What You Will. Yet despite her own resistance to the label “woman writer,” it is clear that she has anticipated and continued to share central feminist concerns. Even in her earlier fiction and critical essays, she attacked what she viewed as perversely masculine ideals.  

Some of her novels are primarily about woman protagonists and their problems. Oates’s fiction has often been misread or approximated with certain preconceived notions about a feminist discourse. There is yet another way where the critics in their analytical methodologies have laid emphasis on what appears to be number of male characters and their predicaments. This is in fact a critical fallacy or a direct consequence of preoccupations with the radical projections of women’s plights. What needs to be specifically understood in this regard is that in spite of the dominating ratio of male characters, the novels in their essence and creative conceptions deal with women’s problems. Hers, in fact, is a woman-centered fiction. However, even in other novels there are many women characters. But as Mary Kathryn Grant has pointed out “in the whole fictional world Oates has created,
there is not one convincingly fulfilled or happy women.” In this fictional world women suffer at the hands of male class-mates, cousins, brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands, and sons. The subjugation and exploitation of women have caught Oates’ attention from the beginning of her literary career.

Her very first novel **With Shuddering Fall** (1964) presents a woman protagonist who is over-shadowed by her dominant and dictatorial father. The social tendencies of considering woman as dependant, weak, and vulnerable are exposed from the beginning of the text. Seventeen-year-old Karen Herz is dependently attached to her father, her religion, and her home. She is a high-school dropout with no interest in men and no desire to get married. She does not want to leave her family. Shar, the son of a neighbor, reluctantly returns home from the town at the beginning of the novel to minister to his dying father. He tricks Karen into accompanying him to the town and makes sexual advances while returning. Her resistance and retaliation results in an accident. To hurt and insult Karen, Shar tell lies to her father about her motives which ensues a brutal fight between the two men. The defeated and bleeding father demands: “Don’t come to me until you get him. Kill him. Kill him. Like Isaac, Karen acquiesces to self-sacrifice in obedient fulfillment of her
father’s command. But rather than simply mounting the sacrificial pyre, she takes the circuitous route of offering herself sexually to Shar, traveling with him on the racetrack circuit, and awaiting her opportunity to affect the retributive death.”

In the opening scene itself Karen is shown forced by her father to accompany him to visit the lonely, dying old Rule at his haunting abode because her father “would not go alone carrying food; that was woman’s work.” Karen can only utter silently the arguments she would like to use. But all her defenses vanish before her father as she is completely overshadowed by him. “In his company she was never more than eight or nine years old; she sensed rather than knew this, and it pleased her. She was his little girl.” Thus the early childhood experiences, as pointed out by the psychoanalytical feminist theories, form the personality of this female child in a particular way. This is the reason why she cannot establish normal relations with Jock when her sister Celine takes her to a meeting with her friend Albert. Instead of taking about love and romance, she starts commenting on her torture at the hands of boys.

In grade school they did what they wanted—played running games and ripped your clothes half off, or rubbed your face with snow to make you cry, or
took off your glasses and hid them. But now...now... no one does those things, but don’t they all think about it? Don’t they all want to?" WF30.

Thus her background and upbringing has completely enfeebled her. When Shar comes to inform her father about his father’s death, “Karen’s heart began to pound. She felt now the mistake of her coming down here, the error she had made in forcing her company into the company of the men. She belonged in her room, in her bed, safe in sleep or in the sluggish halo of sleep that came with dawn.” WF56. The domination of her father, the death of Shar’s father, Rule, and the unexpected arrival of Shar himself has completely bewildered and confused her. She feels utterly restless and helpless and plans to go to Albert’s apartment. Albert would help her. But she does not understand why she needs help, or what she would say to him. Tears flow over her cheeks but she does not even know what she is crying about. To add to her misery, she has to face the sexual advances and physical assaults by Shar while retuning to the village in his car. Irritated by her resistance Shar becomes even more violet. Calling her a goddam little bitch and wishing her to go to hell, he begins to accuse and criticize the entire women-folk. Gripping her neck and digging his nails into her skin, he tries to force himself upon her.
When Shar accuses Karen, her father does not bother to listen to her. Always dependant on her father, she expects consolation from him but he looks at her “as if she were a stranger who had touched his arm in a crowed”. When her father asks her to avenge him, she stubbornly places herself in Shar’s path, baiting him and inviting further violation and abduction. As she lacks the weapons of open aggression, she follows him and very skillfully uses her innocence and patience to tame the violent Shar. He feels helpless before her pleased and silent gaze. Even his strength abandons him. He begins to realize that if he wants to be free of her, he would have to kill her. However, Karen is quite determined to pursue him. As she has become used to a directionless life she decides not to abandon the game herself but continue to play it by plotting and calculating her moves until victory. Thus she provokes him by her passive power and he assaults her once more by making love violently to her. This results in the death of their unborn child. Shar is maddened by guilt and her frigid resistance. He races to a fiery suicide on the auto track. His death results in the mob violence and rioting. Karen also recognizes her own agency and complicity in Shar’s death. Even Max, the friend of Shar, accuses her. He is overwhelmed by the violence and bloodshed which he believes
ensue from her arrival. He tells her that the fruit of her love and the fruit of her womb is blood. He senses a link between the bleeding Karen in her room on the blood-soaked mattress and Shar out alone on the track with his skull smashed. Karen herself is maddened by the series of violent events and we next find her in a mental hospital. At last she comes back from the hospital to her father and family. Her life has completed a full circle. In the end there is reconciliation but not the clearance of confusion in her mind and life.

I can accept them but they will never accept me,…they know that something is wrong with me, that my mind is wrong, Am I to blame for that? Can I help my mind? It is insane to look for meaning in life and it is insane not to; what am I to do?  

Clara, the protagonist of Oates’ second novel A Garden of Earthly Delights (1964), is born with “two strikes against her: she is a woman and she is poor.” The three sections of the novel are named after the three important male figures, Carleton (father), Lowry (lover), and Swan (son), in Clara’s life. Greg Johnson rightly points out that it can be read:

As a feminist novel, the exposition of a woman’s necessary relationship to men and how they affect her emotional and economic survival.
Clara’s life is shaped, formed, influenced, and eventually destroyed by these men. The typical bent of mind and view of life Clara develops closely resembles with that of her father, Carleton’s.

Carleton is forced into farm work by the loss of his farm. Years of poverty and uncertainty have brought him close to the breaking point. The accumulated rage and frustration becomes unbearable. Almost against his will he beats his children—including his favorite Clara. She understands the plight of her father as well as the pressures of economic deprivation. Like Carleton, she develops a strong urge to transcend her situation because girls like her are despised outcasts in the contemporary materialistic culture. They are often referred to as ‘white trash’. Thus her deprived childhood leads her to use:

her own developing sexuality and acquisitiveness as weapons against a society in which she has no inherited place and which denies her any opportunity for self-esteem.\(^9\)

Here Joyce Carol Oates seems to be influenced by the Marxist feminist theory which considers economic class differences as the source of even women’s oppression. Just as Carleton had
kept his sanity by dreaming about returning home to Kentucky and regaining economical stability, Clara falls into a hopeless romantic obsession with Lowry, while maintaining the illusion that she has taken control of her own destiny.

She runs away from her father’s house and accepts the room and job Lowry finds for her. However, Lowry has his own problems and frustrations. He abandons the lonely and helpless Clara who is now pregnant with his child. Hence, Lowry’s “hardened, bitter philosophy only reinforces Clara’s perception of aggression and violence as the keys to survival.”

She soon meets a wealthy married landowner, Revere, who sets her up in a house he owns outside the town. There she gives birth to Lowry’s child (Swan) and waits for the death of Revere’s wife. When Lowry, broken by the war and the depression, returns, she refuses to join him. She makes Revere believe that Swan is his son. She eventually marries him and settles comfortably by manipulating to usurp or inherit everything he owns. Revere not only provides her economic security but also the illusion that she is controlling her own fate. She deliberately gives herself over to him thinking:

All her life she would be able to say: Today she changed the way her life was going and it was no accident. No accident.
Thus Clara very shrewdly acquires economic stability and affluent future for herself and her young son. Thus, like Marxist feminists, Clara sees the cause of her problems and oppression in the class distinction and desperately tries to transcend her class. But all her efforts to transcend the environment, to defeat the fate by asserting her will prove futile. The young son Swan grows to be a paranoid person and in a fit of frustration kills Revere and himself.

The Clara of the last scene of the novel is a defeated, broken woman in her mid-forties. She is driven mad by her experiences. Now she is spending her last days in a private nursing home. She uses her time staring at the television. The programs she prefers to watch are about men engaged in fighting, swinging from ropes, shooting guns and driving fast cars. They show men killing the enemy again and again “until the dying gasps of evil men were only a certain familiar rhythm away from the opening blast of the commercials.”

Commenting on the end of the novel and summing up his analysis of the character of Clara, Ellen Friedman has made a very pertinent remark:
In these televisions shows, she watches versions of the Darwinian drama of her life. Clara’s megalomania has finally defeated her. Ironically, her efforts have succeeded in providing her with only enough money to sustain her homelessness in style.13

Thus the two novels suggest that in the fictional world of Oates women feel helpless and insecure. They have the sense of things falling apart and therefore develop a strong urge to gain control. But all their efforts for security, spontaneity, and stability are thwarted by the masculine violence and American capitalism. All their efforts lead them, like Karen and Clara, to mental asylums.

This sense of powerlessness leads even Nada of Expensive People (1964) to madly fallow the materialistic pursuits. She focuses all her energies upon ever increasing her social status in the cutthroat suburban environment. She is also destroyed by her own inability to give love and compassion in the context of human relationships. Nada:

transforms early emotional insecurity into a need for power that gradually replaces the need for love: Nada seeks social standing and material possessions to fill her inner void.14
Thus like Clara, Nada also lends herself for an analysis on the basis of psychoanalytical and Marxist/Socialist feminist theories. The novel *Expensive People*, too, highlights the general absurdity of the brutally competitive and ruthlessly materialistic culture of contemporary America which generates among the women a sense of void and leads them to materialistic obsessions to the point of neglecting everything including love. It is a culture which hardens them. In a very significant scene she reprimands her son for calling her mother:

> What’s this, now you’re calling me *Mother*? Weaned at last? Don’t give me that solemn weepy look through your glasses, my friend; I don’t particularly care to be called *Mother* by anyone. I don’t respond to it. I’m trying to hold my own and that’s it. No *Mother*, no *Son*. No depending on anyone else. I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it.\(^{15}\)

The novel is a memoir of this eighteen year old narrator protagonist, Richard Everett, who tries to explain why he murdered his mother, Nada. Nada is a successful novelist but her life is “schizophrenically divided between desperate conformity to suburban life-style and bohemian rebellion against it.”\(^{16}\) Sometimes she is ferociously ambitious for and protective of her son. But she is also restless and selfish. She recklessly pursues
her affairs with lovers and disappears from home for long periods. The immediate cause of Richard’s matricide is his despair when he perceives that she is going to leave home once again. Nada was born in a small town North Tonawanda in upstate New York to very insignificant, poor Catholic parents and was named Nancy Romanov. Her father, who had worked in rubber plant, was a very ordinary, apologetic, and slow man with a hump. He had come to America as a migrant.

Nada, like Clara of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, had an urge and craze for social status and like Clara runs away from her parents at the age of nineteen to New York in search of glamour, adventure, and dignity. She seems to be ashamed of her humble origin and therefore never returns, contacts, and mentions her parents. She never discloses their identities and location. Whenever asked about them she tries to create the impression that they were very special nobility and are now dead. Richards learns the truth only after Nada’s death when they come for the funeral.

After coming to New York she changes herself from Nancy Romanov to stylish Natashya or Nada, meets the wealthy thirty-two year old Elwood Everett and succeeds in acquiring the
affluence and status by marring him. She is embarrassed, startled, and outraged by any mention of money. Similarly, every person was puzzled by her preference and choice of the word “power”.

Nada believes in acquiring power, freedom, independence, and in being in control at any cost. She confides to Richard:

There are certain times in a person’s life,…when one simply has to shake himself free….everyone must free himself of impossible pressures of strains and burdens that suffocate him…. (because) freedom is just a condition one has to achieve .It isn’t a new place or a new way of living. It’s just a condition like the air that surrounds the earth. We can’t breathe without it.  

The women like Nada try to fill in the void by food, by money, by things, and by success. But nothing gives them the sense of fulfillment and the inner restlessness keeps them dangling. Elwood and Richard are shocked and bewildered when Nada simply deserts them without leaving any trace of her whereabouts. Elwood is unable to understand Nada’s behavior. Depressed and drinking, he informs his son that all the women in this good old country, America, are trying to be like Natashya. Natashya has succeeded in life. She has everything she desires
and then doesn’t want it. She doesn’t know what she wants. She does not have to work hard. Although she was living in a very wretched condition in a single room with a hotplate and cockroaches when Elwood found her. Even her son, Richard, realizes this. He says that the only and the sorriest truth he knows about his mother is that she wanted only to live but she didn’t know how to do it. This is the reason why she made a mess. He rightly realizes that messes are made by people who want but don’t know what they want, let alone how to get it. Natashya hates her poor origin and life of deprivation. She has deliberately acted to transcend her social class. When she meets a lover of her poor old days, she explains to him that she is a changed person now. He must not expect old things from her. She is trying to survive. Why should she sink down in the damp heap and suffocate like her people and her ancestor. She feels that the world is swimming in a cesspool, trying to keep their heads up. But she is sick of it. Hence she would live other way. She is happy with the luxurious life she is living with Elwood. This is like heaven. She has found this heaven with her efforts. Now she is Natashya Everett. She is out of history. She is clean of its stink and crap. She does not have to thank anybody for it. For all her achievements she can thank only herself and good luck. Friends of the past should not criticize her for not
suffocating in the cesspool. However, Nada is not able to live in and enjoy this hard earned heaven as she is shot dead by her own son for not fulfilling the role of a traditional mother assigned to her by the male dominated society.

In the very first scene of her next novel Them (1969) Loretta Botsford’s lover, Bernie Malin, is killed, beside her in bed, by her brother, Brock. She is raped by the police officer, Howard Wendall, who offers to dispose of the body. Loretta eventually marries him, becomes Loretta Wendall, leaves her drunken father and killer brother and thinks that she has come to the end of her life. She feels content to think that probably she would live there forever. “Everything was fixed and settled, good.” 17

Thus, she moves into an Eden of raising her babies, gossiping, and going to the movies. She thinks that this will never end. But like many other Oatesean women characters, she is plagued with one problem after another. Her sleepy serenity is rocked when Howard is fired for involvement in a prostitution ring, and the entire Wendall clan retreats from the city and moves to dilapidated quarters in the country with their children, their disgrace, and with Mama Wendall. But Loretta is invincible. She
can withstand the shocks. She believes that “There’s not enough bastard in this city to get me down for long.”

However, her life becomes tedious. There is no one to share her gossip and to appreciate and understand her sympathy and indignation. To add to the tedium, there looms the awful presence of nagging Mama Wendall. Loretta tries to make her life interesting and endurable. Unwilling to waste her youth and energy, she flees this shrewd and domineering woman when Wendall is drafted and sent to Europe during the World War II. She takes her children to Detroit where she is arrested the very second day on the charges of prostitution. At the end of the war, Howard returns and the entire family is reunited in the slums of Detroit. Howard sometimes works but drinks always. Loretta finds life repeating itself. Her life has been burdened by too many children, too much work, and too little enjoyment. Howard is killed in an industrial accident. Loretta is left alone to care for her children and her ailing, querulous mother-in-law by herself. She remarries. But her virile and attentive lover turns into a drunken, bad-tempered, out-of-work slum husband, who eventually nearly kills her daughter.
Thus Loretta, like many women of Oates earlier novels, is a victim of the male dominated society. She, too, desperately aspires to rise above the pettiness and stinginess of her life. This she does by creating illusions about future. She is an inveterate optimist. Even at her most pessimistic moments, she harbors only a short-lived feeling of regret. We first see Loretta at the age of sixteen primping in front of a mirror. Looking into the mirror was like looking into the future. She hopes for an ordinary destiny, “the destiny of hundreds of girls like her who had curly hairs flung back over their shoulders.”

She remembers the devastating effects of the Depression on her grandfather’s construction business and craves for economic, domestic, and emotional security as well as romance and thrill. She hopefully believes that anything might happen. But all her efforts end in smoke. Yet even when she is most unhappy with her life as an overweight, impoverished, bored housewife, she resists her condition with a hopeful projection of the future. She believes that she has yet a lot of things to do and places to see.

Thus the history of events in the life of Loretta is set in motion by one man (brother) by killing the other man (lover). It was
further manipulated by one man (husband) and spoiled by another (second husband).

The manipulation and suffering of women at the hands of men becomes clear from the very beginning when Loretta stands looking into the mirror, imagining herself in a glamorous scenario. She felt like in a movie, confronted by a jealous husband in the kitchen. But only a few pages later, when Brock kills her lover, she feels betrayed by her dreams and also by the mortal flesh itself:

Her hatred burst upon her... for men always disappointed you, there was no hope to them, nothing ... Loretta stood in a hazy, vivid hatred...

The hierarchies and the institutions of the male-dominated violent contemporary American society not only victimize Loretta but also control and shape the lives of her children, Jules and Maureen.

Maureen Wendall is one of the most tormented and tormenting characters in the novel. She has the capacity to advance herself beyond her lower-class roots. Yet she is doomed not just by the turmoil of events outside her life, but by the limitations of her
own personality created by male hierarchies. Thus as per the theory of Marxist feminism, women like Loretta and Maureen suffer due to particular economic system under capitalism in society.

Maureen is bright enough and behaves well. She likes to read and makes the public library her sanctuary, where she finds a comforting reality lacking in the instability of her home life. But her innocence is destined to falter. With her brother Jules and sister Betty, she is sent to a Catholic school in Detroit, after Loretta decided to move there. Maureen gets her way by being a quiet, shy, and delicate girl. She is entrusted with the class record book after her election to homeroom secretary. The book represents her acceptance by the world outside her native slum and her ticket to what she believes is a quieter, more orderly and affluent life. She reserves it as a magic token of her distance from the sordid, noisy squalor of her home, as an emblem of the fact that she will not be forced, like her mother, into a future in which she waited in an apartment for a man to come back. Unfortunately, the book disappears and she feels that the world is opening up to trap her. Maureen grows into a frightened, watchful child. As a young girl she is wholly passive, an eternal victim. She suffers the harsh discipline of the nuns at school and
the casual cruelty of her mother. Thus she grows desperate to escape her circumstances and comes to believe that money can be the vehicle of her liberation. Thus this passive and perpetually frightened teenager begins meeting an older man and accepts money for having sex with him. When her stepfather, Pat Furlong, suspects her of misdeeds and discovers the hidden cash, he beats her severely, incapacitating her to bedridden, emotionally withdrawn state for about a year.

Thus Maureen ironically replicates the pattern of her mother’s life, even as she consciously rejects her. Maureen begins going to hotels with men partly because her accumulation of money gives her a sense of secret power over her life, but also because she is rebelling against her roll as the “good girl” in the family. She knows that being “good” has brought her only victimization. But even through she capitulate physically, she does, unlike Loretta, maintain an emotional detachment from her sexual activities, a detachment that will eventually control all her relationships and dictate the shape of her future life.

After Furlong’s beating renders her virtually senseless, and sends her into prolonged catatonia, Maureen retreats for a while into nonbeing; she has “no reflection, no face.” When, after
nearly two years she comes out of this catatonic state, Maureen’s fate is essentially sealed. She is no longer the frightened, desperate child reduced to tears by the criticisms of the nuns or her mother. She is now a cool, manipulative young woman who views life as a power struggle and resolves to get what she wants on her own terms. It is this young woman who enrolls in a night course at the University of Detroit and encounters an English instructor, Joyce Carol Oates, to whom she will eventually write a series of long, impassioned letters. Thus the first thing she does after wakening is to return to school, to a night class taught by a Joyce Carol Oates. She writes to Oates that she studies but cannot accept fiction. Because the books taught to them do not explain the life clearly and truly. The jumble of life is hidden somehow somewhere.

Maureen desperately searches for a way to take control of her life. She has been waiting for something to come to her and to give a shape to the pain. Not finding that something, Maureen seeks other ways to escape. She moves from Detroit to a suburb. She proceeds, however, to make someone fall in love with her. At last she succeeds in seducing Jim Randolf, another of her teachers. Jim leaves his wife and children, marries her, and they start their own family in the suburbs. But Maureen has not found
the key to escape. As Jules reminds her, “this place here can burn down too”.

Both Maureen and Nadine (the beloved of Jules who nearly kills him) are oppressed with the formlessness, the emptiness of their lives which seem to consist of waiting for men to give them shape. Maureen wants to “arrange her life the way she arranged the kitchen after supper, and she too might then be frozen hard, fixed, permanent, beyond their ability to hurt.” Similarly, Nadine claims:

I want to live a good, simple life. I want to put my faith in things that are simple and clear. That’s all a woman asks. I want to put my life in order.

Wounded both physically and psychologically Maureen retreats into a conservative self-defensive position that will control the remainder of her life. At age twenty-six she writes to Oates:

Inside my body and face I am an old woman, not even a woman or a man but just an old person…. I want to marry a man and fall in love and be protected by him. I am ready to fall in love. But my heart is hard and my body hard, frozen.
Alternating Maureen’s story with that of her mother, the novel has dramatized powerfully the effects of a harsh environment on a sensitive young girl. The novel presents the brutalization of a perceptive and innocent and essentially decent child. Maureen and Loretta become the images of the general loneliness and spiritual isolation of the contemporary American society. Maureen, having vented her frustration in the letters to Oates, deliberately seduces a young college instructor away from his family and marries him. Ultimately, she reacts to her brutal early life by cutting herself off from her family, her past, and any possibility of genuine caring, preferring instead a life of sterile conventionality as a housewife in Dearborn, Michigan. Even when her beloved brother, Jules, comes to see her at the end of the novel, she rejects him as well:

she pressed her hands against her ears. She was going to have a baby, she was heavy with pregnancy, but sure-footed, pretty, clean, married. She did not look at him.\textsuperscript{T508}

Maureen has taken the only logical step away from the squalor uncertainty and violence of the past and towards the kind of safety found not in books. But she does it through navigating shrewdly in the real world, finding once own niche and exercising once own power—in her case, sexual power.
Thus Maureen is both pathetic and admirable, a victim who nonetheless survives and continues to live on her own limited but self-defined terms. Jules warns her in the final scene of the novel. He asks her not to forget that her new place there can burn down too. Men can come back into her life. They can beat her up again and force her knees apart. There is so much of such things in the world, so much semen, so many men. To this warning she posits the promise of her baby. She transcends her initial state of passivity and obedience, a state in which she felt in constant danger of engulfment. Now she recognizes in the mirror “a being whom she could bind to the future by making her promises of wifehood and motherhood, and with this being she would attempt to ward off the unpredictable, the events described in Jules’s warning that perhaps await her in the future.”

Maureen becomes tough and resilient in the process. She hardens herself to the environment and to all other people as a defense against further suffering. “The male-oriented power struggle, symbolized by the seething violence of Detroit, certainly visits the human potential of both Loretta and Maureen, forcing them into relatively shallow, distorted lives.”
To the characters of *Them* the most obvious method of salvation from the world that stubbornly resists their manipulations appears to be the heroic stance of the assertion of will. They assert their will for survival even by making hard and painful compromises. This life of compromises is both their success as well as failure. Because even if they are considered as success stories:

these success stories (of Jules and Maureen) are laden with irony. Jules is a punk, thief, pimp, and murderer before. .... Maureen’s history of prostitution and calculated husband snatching similarly distances her from the “typical” American housewife.20

In the last scene, Jules visits Maureen in an apartment safely located in the suburbs, outside of the city. Married now to Randolph she has become a part of the academic society at least as a faculty wife. She is expecting a child. She claims to be a different person who has stepped out of the history of the Wendalls. She grimly refuses to recognize either her culpability or her family ties. She plainly informs her brother that she is not going to see them anymore. But Jules gently chides and reminds her that in spite of everything she will always be a Wendall, a
member of the family. “Maureen continues to perpetuate an old scenario of romance and betrayal; Jules eludes it.”

The fictional world of her next novel *Wonderland* (1971) is also populated by fathers and husbands who try to dominate and control (but ultimately destroy) the lives of their wives, daughters, and children. Unable to cope with the problems of poverty and family responsibilities, Willard Harte kills his wife and children before committing suicide. Similarly Karl Pederson believes that he has been failed by his wife and children; Hilda and Fredrick. His philosophy sanctified a massive egotism engulfing the other members of his family. His daughter Hilda cries, “You want to stuff me inside your mouth. I know you! I know you!” She feels that her womb is a place to which she may retreat from her rapacious father. It is her secret place. In that small sac of a space where a baby might grow, she lived in secret from her father. Her father tries to shape the family according to his own ideas. Mrs. Pederson tries to break free from his suffocating grasp with the help of their adopted son, Jesse.

Even Jesse’s wife, Helene, feels insecure, entrapped, and embarrassed in the male-dominated society and suffers a life of
depression after her marriage. She feels that she is being destroyed and annihilated by her husband who can not imagine her, has no time to imagine her existence. In the words of Creighton:

She is one of many women in Oates’s canon who is not comfortable with her own body. Helene does not enjoy sex and has an excessive dread of pregnancy. Miserably unhappy and sick while pregnant, she yet feels that she must undergo pregnancies for Jesse who wants four children. Her tension and fear of sexual violation reach a grotesque extreme during a gynecological exam when she panics, thrashes her legs around, and runs out of the examination room bleeding from the internal injuries inflicted by the doctor’s instrument as she struggles to release herself. Jesse respects and loves Hellene, but their relationship is mutually unfulfilling.\textsuperscript{23}

According to Friedman “Hellene, like all of the other characters in \textit{Wonderland}, suffers from a disproportionate sense of self. The pregnancy violates her integrity, and signifies her victimization by a process outside her control.”\textsuperscript{24} Later she fantasizes aborting by kitting needles in the bathtub. Jesse’s daughter, Shelly, also feels ‘absorbed’ by his excessive protection and concern. She feels that she exits in her father’s head and he in hers. She says to him:
father you have got to stop thinking about me and let me go. You hypnotize me. I am like a deer standing in the road, hypnotized by the headlights of a car.

Hellene rightly says that Jesse wants to ‘be’ them, own them. He feels that by absorbing them, by assimilating them, he can render them and himself inviolable. Thus Jesse is seen as a cold, brilliant scientist and a vampirish, anxious, and possessive father and husband. Shelley feels his love as a need to dominate, even consume.

In order to escape her father’s engulfing domination she runs away from home with a lover freak and uses drugs heavily. Noel suggests her that in order to free herself, she must obliterate Jesse from her imagination. By becoming Noel’s companion, Shelley is countering the tyranny of her father’s narcissism. In her bitter letters to Jesse she reminds him of his stern discipline. His always forced her and her sister to perfect themselves and to speak in complete sentences. But the irony of her life is that she runs away from her father’s control to the arms of lawless exploiters who pass themselves as guides through the world’s labyrinths. But in reality they reduce her to a symbolic object, a fetish, a pitiable victim. Thus longing for rescue, she drops some clues about her whereabouts in her letters to Jesse and he finally
finds her lying emancipated and near death in a sordid tenement in Toronto.

In the last scene of the hardback edition we see the sick and dying Shelley drifting aimlessly in a boat with Jesse. In the paperback edition, however, her impending death is less certain. Nonetheless, she is a broken woman. As Jesse leads her away from Noel, she says to her father, “you are the devil…come to get me to bring me home.” Paradoxically, by denying his daughter freedom, by forcing her back into the limitation of history and time, to the ironically nourishing restrictions of life lived within the bounds of family and place, Jesse finally becomes the redeeming Christ who acts on the imperative that ‘love demands rescue’.

The men of Wonderland are the egoistic men of science, logic, and brain. They consider feelings as a threat to rational control. They try to even reduce the ‘soul’ to operable mechanical entity. They suppress their own sentimental impulses. Hence their attitude towards women is also negative.

Perraut continued to smile toward Helena. Jesse realized slowly that the old man did not believe in women, in there existence. They did not matter.
They could not understand, it was hopeless to talk to them; and yet one had to talk to them out of politeness… And perhaps Jesse himself did not believe in women the way he believed in men.

Even women themselves in this wonderland of cotemporary America are so tragically conditioned by misogynistic culture and fiction that they cannot overcome the hideous vision of their sexuality. They cannot create their viable identities or support others. They feel trapped by their biology and drive the men who love them into self-castrating frenzies. Instead of offering redemptive union to Jesse, for example, Reva Denkle leads him to madness and sterility. Helene too had always feared her body. She wonders whether she inhibits her body as a tenant. She thinks that a woman’s life is a process of burial by accretion, static and cumulative. She is always “conscious of being a female, a little ashamed of being female.” She realizes that the female identity defined and analyzed by men is very humiliating. Thus the gynecologist’s examination table on which she is laid acquires symbolic significance for her. All women with their heels caught in stirrups are equal on that table.

And suddenly she saw a young woman lying on a table. Herself, contorted like that: a woman on a table, on her back, her face twisted and deformed. She had fallen from a great height and her face was twisted permanently… What was the raw reddened
gap between her legs? So vivid it sucked all the air into it—the entire white sky might be drawn into it and lost.\textsuperscript{W278}

However, she has to face her biological fate. Turning away from the idea of abortion, she submits to another monster inside herself—the fetus. In childbirth she feels victimized by external male domination. She feels farther from herself, from her own body. In this way Helene’s life is an example of how women’s lives have been governed by male hierarchies:

\begin{quote}
All her life she had been posing, moving, speaking in front of other people who watched her closely, and so she did not need mirrors.\textsuperscript{W408}
\end{quote}

In the end Helene retreats from self and society. “It was over: the tyranny of her body, the yearning for other bodies, for talking and touching and dreaming and loving. She had freed her self.”\textsuperscript{W424} But this freedom is in fact a sterile escape of a catatonic person. Thus there seems to be no real escape either for Helene or Shelley. Commenting on this aspect of Shelley’s condition Greg Johnson has rightly said:

\begin{quote}
Traveling around the country, writing obsessively to Jesse, Shelley expresses the cultural conflict of her era. Seeking escape from the voracious and power-hungry establishment (typified by her possessive wealthy father), but finding nothing to
\end{quote}
take its place except drugs, a disordered life-style, and a near enslavement to her boyfriend, she gradually becomes not Shelley Vogel but a mere “shell,” lacking in identity altogether.\textsuperscript{25}

In \textit{Do With Me What You Will} (1973) we again meet a woman like Nada of \textbf{Expensive People}. Ardis is a very pragmatic, dynamic, and manipulating woman. Her husband, Leo Ross, informs their daughter that “for every question he ever asked her, Ardis had an answer: that was Ardis.”\textsuperscript{26} The things she usually carried with her give some idea of her personality. Ross recalls how once she had emptied her purse on a table. The things which fell out include a pink plastic billfold, a golden compact, a golden tube of lipstick, a comb, keys, coins, and a small black pistol, a revolver. Her confidence and mocking self-righteousness had made him crazy even during the divorce proceedings. Ross had properly realized that Ardis wouldn’t lie still even in her coffin. Her legs wear long, like trim and swift swords.

When Ross kidnaps their seven years old daughter, Elena, Ardis dashingly pursues them and at last finds her daughter. When addressed as Mrs. Ross, She angrily reminds the police and the nurses that her name is Ardis Carter. It is her legal and maiden
name. Her professional name is Bonita and she must be addressed by it only.

Ardis starts living alone with her daughter, Elena. If any one—any man—approaches or speaks to her, she stares mockingly at him with her cold bluish-gray eyes. She starts living in a building owned by Karman who is estranged from his wife and grown up children. He begins to take interest in Ardis. Although, she is not impressed by him, she begins to entertain him. She confides to her daughter that if she doesn’t get ten hours of sleep she wouldn’t last through one of those conversations with him.

She is very pragmatic and constantly tries to improve her lot by manipulating the lives of other people as well as that of her own daughter. She also tries to mould her daughter in her own philosophy:

So you’d better change your tune. You’d better wise up. There won’t always be a mother to pay far your food and take care of you—what do think this world is? It isn’t a nursery!  

Like Nada, Ardis also considers her child a burden. She says to Karman that a child is a responsibility one is never free of. She
got married when she was quite young. Hence she became a mother when she was quite young.

When she fails to gain stability or launch her daughter as a child model, she decides to befool Karman by accepting to be his wife. She changes their names to Ardis Karman and Elena Karman. As per the plan she takes seventy five thousand dollars from him and drives to Chicago. Karman was to join them later. But instead of Chicago, she goes to New York and forgets Karman altogether.

In New York she starts living in a luxurious flat. But gradually the money dwindles and she has to move to a two room flat with cockroaches around. She begins to feel that she can not manage New York. She can not accomplish anything here. She can not get modeling assignments either for herself or for her daughter. Sometimes she feels that it would have been better if she had gone to Chicago. But the thought of Karman mauling her was repulsive and unbearable:

If it’s one thing I can’t stand, she said, its men mauling me. It’s very annoying, it’s boring. You won’t like it either. You try to think about something else but you can’t. Men are like machines, they’re like automatic washers that must
go through certain cycles, one after the other, it’s all so predictable and boring … for women who have no imagination, who can’t think of anything better to do with their lives, maybe it’s all right for them, but not for someone like me.

When the problems increase Elena meekly suggests her to take a job. However, Ardis believes that life is excremental. She consoles her by informing about her philosophy. She believes that one is not a failure until he dies. And after death who cares about the failure or success:

> We’re our one 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. I know who you are too. We’ll both do well, don’t worry.

Later Ardis starts working as a cocktail waitress at a club — the Black Flamingo – and then as a hostess in transparent skirts and bodices. Sadoff, the owner of the club who was married to a girl twenty years younger than himself, was very found of Ardis. But she politely explains to him that she was interested only in working in the club. She was retiring from modeling as well as retiring from men. As his wife began divorce proceedings against him, Sadoff began to take more interest in Ardis. Sometimes he would let his hand casually fall on her shoulder or
thighs. But she used to move away. She made it clear to him that she was only a business woman, nothing else. She was like a man. Sadoff decides to leave New York and start ‘Pyramid club’ at Detroit. He begs and succeeds in convincing Ardis to move to Detroit with him. He even made the down payment on a house for her because, as she told him, it was her dream to live like normal people. She admits her daughter in a school. But she is not emotionally attached to her. She wants to be free and independent like Nada and pursue her own career. She tells Elena that when she was of her age she was totally independent of other people and their ideas of her. She didn’t give a damn for anybody. She neither had any friends nor did she want any. She moved out when she was thirteen. She got her first job at the age of thirteen, and paid for her own room and board. She tried to get out from under her parents’ control. They were good and she liked them too. But she wanted to be independent.

In a Detroit club, Marvin Howe, the rich and legendary lawyer, sees Elena and is drawn towards her. Ardis very shrewdly arranges Elena’s marriage with him on some conditions, many of which were not informed to Elena herself. She even agrees to move away from the life of her daughter altogether saying:
Fine good! I happen to have plans for a life of my own, believe it or not! You are not the only person who thinks about the future!

Ardis does not meet Elena for years, changes her name as Marya Sharp, and starts working on T.V. as an interviewer. She does not even attain the call of Elena when the later wishes to seek her help in her distress and depression. When in a party she realizes that this Marya Sharp is actually her mother, Elena becomes overwhelmed with emotions and shock. However, Marya (Ardis) takes her to a corner and tells her that Marvin does not want anybody to know that his wife is the daughter of an ordinary woman like Ardis. He is very rich and he loves Elena. What more could you want out of life? Hence don’t endanger her own marriage by talking to him about Ardis. When they meet she will be Marya Sharp. Elena is a lovely girl but at that point in her own career Ardis doesn’t want a grown-up daughter. She even pretends not to be Marya Sharp but someone else, when Elena happens to locate her in the market or clubs.

Elena is awakened after her affair with Jack. When she last meets her to seek some explanation, Ardis again not only behaves in a very emotionless manner but also expresses her cynical view about love:
Love is destructive of the ego and therefore—therefore—destructive in some ways, not healthy, I forget his exact terminology but it’s entirely convincing. In fact, though I didn’t dare articulate this on television, he seemed to be stating my own believes…

She also informs her that she is engaged to marry one Mr. Nigel Stock. He is a rich sixty years old Englishman who lives in London. She promises to invite Elena to her marriage. However, in the last part of the novel she only sends a recorded massage to her acquaintances including her daughter: “By the time you hear this, my husband and I will be settled in London…. those of you who know me will understand what this kind of life will mean to me… I have already begun studying the history of my new, adopted country, I feel that I will make a permanent home there and not just be a “transplanted” American or expatriate.”

This is what we last know about Ardis.

Thus like Clara of A Garden of Earthly Delights Ardis manages to transcend her circumstances by shrewdly manipulating and ruthlessly sacrificing everything. She seems to have achieved affluence and stability. However, her end is ambiguous. Whether her dreams are really fulfilled or she meets
the fate of Clara, Nada, and other heroines of the earlier novels of Oates, remains an open question.

On the other hand, it is Elena who has been the victim of violent, materialistic, male-dominated contemporary American society. After the divorce of her parents she lives with her mother, Ardis. Irritated by the forced divorce and denied the right even to meet his daughter, the father grows bitter and psychic. In a sort of fit of rage and anger, he kidnaps his own innocent daughter from the school and runs to different places to hide. Elena had been a loving and obeying girl. So she agrees to his orders not knowing his intentions. Thus from the beginning of her life she is ordered, guided, shaped, and persuaded leaving little scope for herself to think or grow:

Obey me, Elena, obey me. Yes, like that, yes, don’t be afraid—crawl under—crawl under. You’ll hurt your Daddy’s feelings if… Good girls don’t cry when they are with their fathers, do they? That’s right, say it again, now….don’t make me angry …. Your daddy is very strong, Elena, men are very strong, much stronger than women …

Thus at the tender age of seven, Elena is abducted and mistreated by her father. He tells her that her mother is dead. He keeps her locked in a motel room where he starves her, sedates her gin, and
finally abandons her. The police finds her and place her in the children’s shelter. She is autistic. She is even unable to move or eat. She finds it impossible to speak.

This childhood trauma has a formative effect on Elena. She had to obediently remain in the dark for hours to avoid detection. She retains this exaggerated passivity and fearful withdrawal from experience even when she is returned to Ardis. Ardis forces her to speak by threatening to abandon her. She has been completely maimed with no movement, no thinking, and no resistance to anything.

Elena exercises cautions in even the most mundane details of living, fears the dark, and regains her speech with difficulty. Although Elena is rescued from the clutches of a cruel and careless father, her life does not change categorically. Her opportunistic mother cruelly manipulates her until she is seventeen. Elena is constantly controlled, guided, and styled even by her mother. Ardis tries her level best to launch herself and more particularly Elena as a child model. Elena is treated as an object that can be used to make progress and for betterment. “Sit still. Like that. Don’t blink. Be good, be a good girl. Yes. Perfect.” Ardis not only neglects Elena’s deadliness but
even tries to en cash it. Elena resents her thingification. She hated them looking at her so directly. Ardis controls each and everything in Elena’s life:

But you, honey, you should gain a little weight. The general public doesn’t appreciate thinness… men don’t.

When Ardis fails to gain any benefit from Elena by introducing her as a model, she arranges a marriage for her to Marvin Howe, an extremely rich and powerful lawyer whom Elena has seen only twice and who is twenty four years her senior. The marriage is sealed with a contact Howe makes up, containing forty-five clauses, none of which speaks of love. One clause dictates that they will never have children. In the last part of the novel Howe informs Elena that Ardis allowed him access to Elena very shrewdly “because she could always recognize the value of any negotiable property.”

Elena’s life with Howe is entirely passionless. She feels no thrill, no excitement, and no emotions. She is like one of the costly and beautiful artifacts purchased by him. She lives in that condition for ‘Twenty-eight Years, Two Months, Twenty-six Days’ (the title of the part one of the novel). When he makes love to her
she feels no pain, no alarm, nothing, but drifting, absolutely still, gentle, empty. As her husband tells her, she is untouched by the corruption of the world. She lives in the vacuum.

But the problem with being so peacefully outside of the world is that Elena has no connection to it. She has a hand in the usual activities of a suburban matron. She entertains, attends charitable functions, takes classes, and even receives letters from her husband’s mistress. But nothing creates in Elena any stirring of “life”. In deed, as Part One ends, she is stuck in time and place, a self without a selfhood, imitating the perfection and permanence of the statue before her:

A skin marked by tears, turning slowly greenish-gray. Gone into perfect hardness. Yes. She feels very well now, very happy. Yes, yes, everything has come to rest, in perfection it comes to rest, permanent.
1:45.
Stopped.
Permanent.
1:45.
Stuck. She does not move.

It is Jack who finds her standing lifeless like a hypnotized person in the market. He rescues her and takes her to her house. Jack, whose father’s life was saved by Howe in a case, is infatuated by the passive beauty of Elena. Elena comes out of this stupor
gradually but still feels distraught, confused, and helpless. Once, Howe sends her urgently and secretly to California. He seems to be in some serious trouble. Elena is instructed not to disclose her identity and whereabouts to anybody. She is guarded by his men there. However, bored and distressed she impulsively phones Jack and invites him to her place. Embarrassed but overjoyed, Jack comes there. They meet and make love in a hotel room. She then returns to her place where her anxious husband is waiting for her. They return to New York after she experiences orgasm with Jack. However, a permanent change comes over her. In her bedroom at home she thinks that this is the last time she will sleep there. She feels the string of new life within her, the equivalent of a pregnancy which she can not control or deny. She is shocked and confused about her own adultery. She is torn between the two men. Although she feels attraction and love for Jack, she remains in a vacuous state. She tries her level best to deny this feeling and to return to her selfless void, driving Jack nearly into a murderous rage.

At the end of Part three she returns ill and suicidal to her husband. Later, Howe takes her to Maine to cure her illness and to evade Jack from her mind. But Elena realizes with growing clarity that now it is not possible for her to return to her former
stupor. She realizes that everything—the universe—is awake and it can not be escaped. She respects her husband but is physically repulsed by him and is no longer able to withdraw. She feels that she must leave him to affirm her own life. She takes on a hardness and a self-determination that she was incapable of before. Hence, she finally decides to leave her husband. She does not care for money, security, and future. Howe says to her that she can’t make any decision about her life and future, if she is so upset. She replies, “I don’t need anyone to tell me what to do. She was free.” Now, it is Elena who becomes aggressive in her relationship with Jack. She goes to his apartment and waits for him outside. At the end of the novel, Elena and Jack embark on their new life together with a look of pure kinship and triumph.

It is significant to note that the novel was dedicated to Patrica Hill Burnett who was a former beauty queen and a feminist. As Creighton Joanne has pointed out:

This uncharacteristically happy ending is the first successful liberation through love in Oates’s novelistic world. ... Oates wants us to view Elena’s awakening as an emblem for all women’s liberations.
But this liberation, awakening, or successful romantic ending is (like the success stories of Maureen and Jules in Them) not completely free from ironic touches and uncertainties. It is acquired through secrecy, betrayals, and adultery. It is interesting to note that the part three of the novel which traces the adulterous relationship of Jack and Elena through the vicissitudes of their affair is entitled as ‘Crime’. Again “While the relationship is remedial for Elena, rescuing her from madness and possible suicide, it radically upsets the balance of Jack’s existence.”

Elena has damaged innocent bystanders: Jack’s wife and his newly adopted son. The last scene is ambiguous. Because Jack resists the relationship for a long time. It takes a lot of time, energy, and calculation for him to come out of the house to join Elena.

In A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) Oates intends to critically review the traditional genre of romance as well as to explore the ‘female fate’. The novel is looked upon as an exhaustive and apt parody and the revision of this genre. Oates is aware of the fact that:

Victorian romance not only satisfied the popular test but enforced ‘the Cult of True Womanhood’,
tightening women’s domestic bondage through a deviously palliative and escapist strategy.\textsuperscript{30}

Similarly considering romance as a form of sexual feudalism, Rachel Blau DuPlessis notices women writers of the twentieth century (in contrast to their more duplicitous nineteenth century sisters) “openly assailing castle walls, breaking through narrative boundaries, resisting conventions, writing beyond the ending.”\textsuperscript{31} This observation can aptly be applied to \textbf{A Bloodsmoor Romance} as well.

Here the narrator is an anonymous nineteenth century literary spinster of advanced age. And the American Adam or the patriarch of this history is John Quincy Zinn, a self-styled transcendentalist and inventor. His daughter, Samantha Zinn, who serves as his laboratory assistant, is dehumanized into becoming an experimental animal, testing his expertise in cosmetic repair. But “his crime against his child’s integrity and his monstrous pride nonetheless mark him as a stereotypic American villain (and frequent Oates target), a madman of science.”\textsuperscript{32} Although his work (an attempt to create a time-machine) is initially ignored, he attracts the national attention and is asked to create a medium for principal punishment. But by the end of the novel, he becomes a mirthless alchemist.
Ironically, he is driven from the backwoods haunts, dismayed by the outcome of one of his experiments and the growing hostility of the rural community to his preaching. He has to run for his life from his utopia into the bustling urban America. After the family reunion and the so-called happy ending at the close of the novel, the narrator returns to his story. The final scene of the novel is in the sorcerer’s workshop. On the eve of the twentieth century, John Zinn is described lying worn out, feeble, and dying. He is unable to return to the laboratory to retrieve his final formula. Deirdre, his only caretaker, assents to seek the paper bearing the formula. But candles waver in the draft and the formula is vanished in a sudden fire. The fire also devours Zinn’s other bizarre projects.

However, the narrator seems to be more spellbound by the lives and adventures of the female members of Zinn family. This is the reason why many readers have found A Bloodsmoor Romance akin to Louisa Mary Alcott’s Little Women which is, as Madelon Bedell suggests, about:

The complexities of female power and the struggle to maintain it in a male-dominated society.33
Taper Bender also feels that *A Bloodsmoor Romance* can be studied as a reading of a nineteenth-century text from a twentieth-century perspective. The Zinn sisters (Constance Philippa, Malviana, Octavia, Samantha, and the adopted one Deirdre) are little women with a vengeance. “They nurse romantic, escapist fantasies like those of Alcott’s March family, and even display many of the same superficial character traits, although in comically exaggerated form.” The lives of the Zinn ‘little women’ are undeniably the contests for authority, identity, and power. Their histories constitute Oates’s real inside story of Victorian romance. It is further proved by the fact that while reflecting upon the role of technology in John Zinn life, Oates has also shown the impact of American science on women’s lives:

Zinn’s machinations frequently violate the integrity of adoring women and children; he actually seems to prefer the company of the monkey to that of his own daughters. Obsessively pursuing a formula which would result in the earth’s holocaust, Zinn sleeps out of his patriarchal role into Frankenstein attire with almost horrifying ease, leaving a nearly impossible task of reclamation to daughters and narrators.

The mechanical, technical, and cynical attitude towards women affects their lives in more than one ways. Oates also shows her
awareness of the social history and feminist theory by presenting the new American ‘type’, the gynecologist. In the novel these ‘specialists’ in female complain:

Dispense stern proscriptions to the Bloodsmoor women, warning them against intellectual pursuits (including the reading of romances); they regard the female body as a diseased machine. Through their efforts and the sports of a cadre of feminine advisors, women view their sexuality as ‘The Mark of The Beast’, with both hilarious and horrifying results.  

Again, the narrator herself feels discomfort while dealing with such topics. It is a clear proof of the conditioning of the Victorian women’s mind. It highlights the gulf between the social rules and women’s experiences.

Of all the ‘little women’ of the novel, Deirdre Zinn’s history is the most significant one. Like many of the characters in popular romances, she is also a foundling. Yet the revelation of her true parentage in the later part of the novel does not bring a happy end. Her history, again and again, manifests perversity of a masculine drive to explain the women’s spiritual experience. Deirdre is terrorized by a nightmare of Victorian domesticity. She frequently imagines herself being stabbed by the sharp embroidery scissors of her step-sister, Malviana. Tested by
scientific investigators, she loses contact with her spirit-voices, but at the cost of mental breakdown. Ironically her dubious male inquisitors suffer madness and even death in the course of their attempts to unveil the mystery of their miserable medium. Thus the ghost-ridden Deirdre proves to be amazingly resilient.

Malviana Zinn also feels frustrated and wishes to escape her needle work and the confines of Bloodsmoor. She runs off with an actor, Orlando Vandenhoffen. Like many of Oates’s earlier heroines she is narcissistic, forever checking her image in the mirror. The narrator describes this disapprovingly because a woman’s self-love is incompatible with the Victorian ideal. To add to the embarrassment, she also has her own zesty sexual appetite. She feels liberated as soon as the lights go out. However, the narrator considers it to be the curse of Bloodsmoor women. The demonic unpredictability of her body makes her particularly terrifying to would-be-lovers. They do not seem to be interested in feminine response in spite of their seductive rhetoric. It is very amusing and revealing to see her most famous wooer, Mark Twain, running from a hotel, unclothed and undone by the laughing, devilish Malviana. However, believing herself wicked and lost, she sadly quits the scene and the stage and becomes “Miss Malviana Quincy, Spinster Instructress of Elocution, Music, and the Thespian Arts” at one of the numerous and
presumably virtuous female academies. When she reappears to take part in the novel’s last chapters, she has found her own new admirer, a tweedy professor. The author thus liberates her from the seminary to assign her the romantic role of faculty wife.

Samantha Zinn is marked by literal birthmark like that on her father’s face which he tries to remove. This initiates Samantha into the world of science. But the narrator warns that such unsuitable employment makes a woman unappealing. The point is seemingly proven when this brainy Zinn falls in love with a boy of a lamentably obscure family. Her beloved is a child once sends spinning into the future by John Zinn’s time-travel machine. Hence, the narrator is not at all surprised when Prudence Zinn arranges Samantha’s betrothal to an aristocratic but syphilitic heir. The self-assured Samantha reacts with indignation. She pursued her lover, Hareton, to elope. They leave the laboratory and the Octagon House for a simpler life, sustained by her own practical inventions. Her father by now is working on torpedoes and instruments of detonation. But Samantha instead takes patents for inventions which will bring joy to many twentieth century sisters. She works on baby-strollers and disposable diapers. Thus, Samantha Zinn finally
takes mattes into her hands, moving into the world of commerce and practical science.

Constance Philippa, a tomboy, has climbed trees and fearlessly waded through streams, half in love with a school girl neighbor. The narrator is disturbed by her bad manners, and especially by the ribald ballad she perpetually hums about a fox. (Reminding Lawrence’s story about homosexual love, The Fox.) Prudence also makes arrangements for the betrothal of Constance to an impressively titled piggish German baron. Constance does not openly resist. But as her wedding day draws near, she is more and more frightened of the marriage bed. Even though her girlhood has been unconventional to a remarkable extent, she is ignorant about her sexuality like most of the ordinary Victorian woman.

She begs her mother for enlightenment. But she gets nothing except the chilly silence and even more mystifying euphemistic advice from ‘Wedding Day Books’ which substitute sentiments for information. Maddened by apprehensions she disappears on her wedding night. She runs away shrewdly leaving her own effigy, a dressmaker’s dummy in her place. Bender rightly points out that:
Oates view of the anesthetic effect of Victorian conventions -- the transformation of healthy girls into hollow women—is strikingly represented by the array of dummies standing upright in the Zinn/Kiddemaster sewing room long after the living models has left the scene.\textsuperscript{38}

As per the convention of popular romances, in the last part of the novel, the Zinn sisters are summoned to Kiddemaster Hall. The occasion is the reading of the will of another advice-giver, Aunt Edwina. It is made obligatory for all the sisters to be present. Here everybody is shocked to see a tanned and beardless young man, Mr. Philippe Fox. He has come from the West to represent Constance Philippa. In a scandalized whisper the narrator informs the readers that Philippe was once Constance. He is physically altered by her practice of wearing men’s clothing. Thus like many otherwise well-educated Victorian women, even the narrator shows an amazing simplicity about sexuality and human physiology.

The case of Constance/Philippe Fox is another example of the prevalent misconceptions about female physiology. Women come to tragic ending due to the naïve concepts of gynecology. They are cramped, starved, and dosed with laudanum and other more fatal potions for controlling their wild, scattered, and
unproductive thoughts. The anorexic fate of Grandmother Kiddemaster is thus more than a variation on a familiar Oatesean theme. The narrator informs with impressed regard that this good lady had gradually conquered her appetite in all its insidious forms. But the physicians blame her resulting death not on fasting but on ovarian neuralgia. The narrator is a wide-eyed post mortem witness. She informs that the corpse of the hunger artist weighs only forty-three pounds. As a result of years of whalebone corseting, the inner organs become either nonexistent or “of a miniature, or atrophied, nature.”

It is interesting to note that this Aunt Edwina leaves a curiously subversive legacy (a hand-crocheted item) to Octavia who is considered to be the angel of the house. This is, probably, also the reason why Octavia is the narrator’s favorite too. Proving herself a modest daughter and accommodating bride, she tolerates the perverse sexual practices of her ‘respectable’ husband and the nasty behavior of their ‘innocent’ son, Little Godfrey. Octavia is a target of abuse by both husband and son. The narrator has been shocked by the reckless behavior of Malviana and Constance. But she seemingly does not question Octavia’s wifely or maternal obligations. A dutiful reporter, she describes in meticulous detail the accidents which result in
Octavia’s liberation. Complying with her husband’s sexual fetishes, she accidentally strangles him. She has always been a good hostess. She can not leave her guests in time to save Little Godfrey from a watery death (The naughty boy dies while trying to drown John Zinn’s pet monkey in the Kiddemaster well.)

Octavia’s story is a comical Victorian romantic parody. She is genuinely loving and tolerant. She keeps track of her willful sisters after her parents disown them. Generous of spirit, she avoids the miniaturization of little women like her Grandmother. She is able to do without feminine remedies, opium-laced nostrums provided by mothers and doctors. At the end of the story, Octavia has made the best match. Her loving second husband is a figure from the romantic fiction and her girlish fantasies. He is a dashing Irish unwavering boy, now grown to be a dynamic and respected member of the modern Bloodsmoor community. With him at her side, among her sisters (and ‘brother’), Octavia waits for Great Aunt Edwina’s testament.

Aunt Edwina is another of novel’s significant points of reference. In contrast to the nameless narrator, she is a celebrity. She is like one of those contemporary popular woman writers who perpetuate the cult of true womanhood. Her very rhetoric
renders her as an accomplice to a system bent at trivializing female pursuits by absurd exaggeration. Yet Oates also shows the cost of such complicity. Aunt Edwina has also been a victim of that system. Living out the terms of Victorian romance, she accepts the gynecologist’s opinion of her sex and abandons Deirdre, her own daughter, for the life of an invalid. She has been rewarded by a public reputation. But she has suffered from private deprivation. She has turned her unspent energies to the production of hundreds of pages of pulp fiction and good conduct guides. Her testament has been planned as her last publication. However, her inheritance comes rather late to rescue Deirdre who is recovering from the ravages of psychic battle and life long rejection.

Deidre’s sudden shift in destiny could provide a romantic way out of this story. The other sisters have also found fitting husbands. The new brother brings the novel full circle with a dashing abduction scene. He rescues his former schoolgirl love from the literal prison of her loveless marriage. The lengthy sentiments read by Aunt Edwina’s lawyer can supply an apt Victorian close.
Hence, it remains for the narrator to bring this history to a satisfactory close. Yet she has also undergone a series of changes. She was once an accomplice of Aunt Edwina. She also shares her perception of the moral contours of the universe and the virtues of Victorian hearth and home. Yet her eye for details, in the end, has given her a view of human evil too close for comfort. This is the reason why the narrator now expresses reluctance to continue. She claims that the timidity mandated by Victorian culture for women writers becomes a barrier in the creation of great novels.

Indeed, I am bound to confess here that I have, upon several occasions, shrunk from taking up this strand, ... out of that timidity of my sex, that has rendered us so generally unfit for the creation of great works, ---a timidity that has unapologetic basis in natural ignorance and innocence...

The close textual analysis of some of Oates’ representative early novels clearly betrays her profound understanding of and sincere concern about women’s issues. By writing about the victimization, constrains, and confusions in women’s lives, she has been questioning and challenging the male hierarchies which have been a major cause of women’s suffering.
However, Oates makes everything seemingly clear but not didactic. Her language and style, too, is almost always restrained. This differentiates her from other American women writers who openly attack the male hierarchies in an uninhibited language. The mode of radical defiance of the male hierarchies is best exemplified by works of Erica Jong.
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