CHAPTER I

LUST FOR LIFE

No bonds can hold, no bounds can hem my flight,
I soar through space as freely as a bird;
My endless realm is thought, my throne is light,
my winged sceptre is the living word.

"Poesie" Friedrich Von Schiller.

Priorities: Living in an era which persistently proclaims the death of the novel, Joyce Carol Oates maintains a defiant posture, insisting that the novel is very much alive, giving shape and order to reality. She is an artist of incomparable power of expression, blending reality and vision with great comprehension. A unique creative genius, Oates articulates her concern for the fundamental maladies, tormenting the times. Philip Roth has explained this predicament that the "American Writer in the middle of the Twentieth Century has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make credible, much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of
embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist."¹

Oates is concerned about America and its problems. She records the restless Americans confronting the puzzle of life. She evokes their desperate loneliness in the multiple planes of living, decisively touching their dreams and passions. Convinced, that the "use of language is all we have to pit against death and silence, and committed to "recreating the world through language," Oates remarks, "In the novels I have written, I have tried to give shape to certain obsessions of mid-century Americans, a confusion of love and money, of categories of public and private experience, of a demonic urge, I sense all around me, an urge to self annihilation, suicide, the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender."² As a writer, Oates while trying to


describe this mysterious age, is also creating it. G.F. Waller eruditely explains that "Oates's work reveals her to be among the most sensitive recorders of the intellectual, social and most important of all - the emotional dynamics of our time." 3. Novels, short stories, plays, anthologies of poetry and Literary criticism have flowed freely from Joyce Carol Oates's pen, since 1963, revealing a total dedication to work. This dazzling multiplicity of writing bewilders, impresses and perhaps, even dismays her readers. Nevertheless her 'demonic imagination' remains unsurpassed. "I have laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book," Oates announced in 1972 and in 1978 she informed that "A writer's job, ideally is to act as the conscience of his race... I would not be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me." 4. While her indefatigable energies consistently provide new directions to her work, her painstaking and


4 Quoted in "Author Joyce Carol Oates on 'Adolescent America,' U.S. News and World Report, May 15, 1978, p. 6"
erudite discussions on literature discover her deep commitment to fiction. "No story is really fiction," Oates writes, "the aim of a serious, respectful art is to externalize personal, private, shapeless fantasies into structures that are recognizable to other people."  

Oates evidently moves forward, articulating her deep interest, in works of literature, passionately rendering the limitations of the body, the spirit, and the human condition. She mentions "I feel my own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my time and to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move on to the future."  

Possessing, a great passion to comprehend the extremities of life and death, and a super human application, Oates is already a celebrity, kaleidoscopically representing human response.

**Publishing Record:** Locating herself near the centre of frenetic fictional activity of the contemporary times, Oates is, as Inhab Hassan remarks, "celebrating darkly the traditional pieties of the novel."  

Her erudite

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habits and intellectual gifts, fired by an unearthly energy, offer magnificent and profound dimensions to her creativity. She has authored more than forty volumes of fiction, poetry, drama and literary criticism. Her colossal work forms a life time reading. She appears to permit no concessions to her meticulously cultivated professionalism. Her work provides fascination towards the personality that creates and inspires it. With the ever improving output, Oates is increasingly sharpening her focus on 'living with many compromises.' She affirms that "the greatest works of literature deal with the human soul caught in the stampede of time unable to gauge the profundity of what passes over it" (NHNE. 41). While examining James Dickey's work, Oates writes, that "a mysterious, unfathomable revolution seems to be taking place in our civilization." It is only through the artist, laying bare his personal history, as representative of the crisis of society, can this spirit of revolution be "knowable" or "governable" (NHNE. 246).
Calvin Bedient rightly estimates her as one of the most formidable talents of the era. 8

Formative years and early education: Oates has for long avoided the limelight and her personal life has almost remained exclusive. In her work, Oates often returns to the landscape of her childhood. This dear and familiar landscape settles as 'back grounds', while the social, philosophical and psychological determinants, constitute the 'foregrounds' in her fiction. Lockport, in Niagara County, the place of her birth, a small City near Buffalo on the Erie Bridge Canal, remains the setting for many of her stories. Oates admits, that the 'Eden County' of her stories is an 'imaginary correlate of - Erie County in Western New York.' 9

She considers her rural childhood quite significant in formulating her opinions on the physical reality. She was born on June 16, 1938.


Her father Frederick James Oates, a tool and die designer with Irish roots, had to leave his formal education while very young. For her parents, 'Eden' was never a paradise, for its sterile land stifled their enthusiasm in the very living. She deliberately chooses the rural people and blue collar workers, her parents knew intimately, in her fiction. Oates has learnt to view the economic realities, superseding all necessities of life. She believes, that one has to be poor, to comprehend the turmoil in asserting one's will in absolute penury. Having her early education in a one room school, Oates later moved to the Williams Ville Central High School, from where she graduated in 1956. Moving to Syracuse University on a New York State Regent's scholarship, Oates took courses in English and Philosophy. She has understood that literature has a definite relationship with philosophical enquiry.  

"Professor Donald A. Dike, to whom Oates has dedicated her first novel, With Shuddering Fall, remembers Oates as "the most brilliant student we've had here." While


11 Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence in Newsweek, December 11, 1972, p.73."
Oates was doing her Post-graduate course at the University of Wisconsin, she met Raymond Joseph Smith, a Doctoral candidate at a party, and six months later they were married. Noticing one of her short stories cited in the Honour Roll of the latest volume of Martha Foley's Best American Short Stories, Oates changed her plans for research and devoted a year to publish her first collection of short stories. She worked in Canada at the University of Windsor, teaching courses in creative writing and Modern European literature, while her husband Smith, specialized teaching Eighteenth Century English Literature. They have recently moved to the campus of Princeton University, N.J. on Oates accepting the position of Writer-in-Residence. A contende of National Book Award for A Garden of Earthly Delights (1968) and for Expensive People (1969), Oates won the award for them (1970). She has also received awards from the National Foundation in Arts and Humanities, and the National Academy in Arts and Letters, for continuing achievement along with O. Henry Prizes.

Shedding at last her self-imposed seclusion, Oates has started recently, evincing keen interest even in the matters of publicity and marketing of her fiction
Her return to her country appears to have shed all her inhibitions, bringing her into the main stream and great recognition. The biographical details subscribed are chosen to highlight the formative features in a creative writer's career.

*Personality and creative habits:* Alfred Kazin notices Oates as a very shy and simple person. A teetotaller, with very little time for small talk, jokes, gossip and malice, Oates appears quite unostentatious to her interviewers. She creates the impression of a 'graduate student taking oral examination'. But she hides behind her schoolgirl image, a great amount of mental existence so vocal in her fiction. She presents a picture of total poise, not much affected either by pain or by pleasure. This attitude appears to help her, in capturing the mosaic of emotional interaction, with the least subjectiv compunction. She appears to be an intense, friendly, serious and a very private person. She is so passionate creative that she seems to seek solace from Mozart's Symphony playing in the background, while she responds to questions in an interview. She sits observing, without even volunteering a smile, with her 'extraordinarily
big dark jewelled eyes burning in a dove's face', very inquisitive but timid. Interviewers have expressed the opinion that with her smile, contrasted with the quiet and earnest looks, Oates presents a unique beauty, a blend of emotion and intellect, abundantly reflected in her work. She informs an interviewer that a dozen trivial events, a hundred chores fill her life. She sincerely believes that only these trivial things keep every one "from spinning completely off into the dark, into the abstract universe." She describes herself in the same interview as "orderly and observant" "scrupulous," and "deeply introverted." Oates articulates as an intellectual, remaining at the same time exuberantly passionate. She is addicted to work and scrupulously avoids all artificial stimulants.

Oates sincerely informs that much serious writing is done, just to relieve the mind of things that haunt it,

and not to create immortal literature. Ignoring the formal writing habits, Oates ventures to capture her experiences often in day dreams. Composition is always smooth and rapid. She simply records her stories, collecting as they emerge coherent, from her subconscious. She is said to write the way Mozart wrote down his compositions—straight from her head. With unique working habits, she writes incessantly, even while waiting for her luggage on trips, and often between takes of a magazine cover photo session. Teaching creative writing courses, Oates encourages her students to waste time in musing, and pursue writing in all kinds of moods. She earnestly believes that exhaustion and depression might promote a mystical imagination. To Oates, reading constitutes the greatest pleasure of civilization. Fond of all good writing, she even enjoys the rereading of old works.

**Literary Roots:** Joyce Carol Oates has blossomed into a writer at a tender age. Her first short story collection

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By The North Gate (1963) encouraged critics to compare her to Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Willa Cather, and William Faulkner. Stanley Kaufmann mentioned, as early as in 1963, that Oates "shows her antecedents in shape and view. Miss Oates, not only knows where she comes from but where the quick nerves of its life are and how to bind us to them." 14 Faulkner and Kafka, introduced to her at Syracuse, appear to be the major early influences. Oates reveals in confidence, "I was bowled over by Faulkner.... then Kafka... later, Freud, Nietzsche, Mann--they're almost real personalities in my life. And Dostoevsky and Melville. Stendhal is later discovery. And Proust." 15

She is inspired by Faulkner to present a mythical Eden County setting, for most of her early stories in clear Yoknapatawpha fashion. She reveals an affinity for writing about a community, cradled in a distinct tradition. She depicts a sense of tragedy possible in humdrum lives with a choice of subjects like murder, men


defectives, racial tensions and sexual outbursts, very much like Faulkner. This fancy for emulation, turned Oates into a Southern writer in the North, creating an atmosphere of intense pride, rural violence and sustained animosity. She mentions often that she is indebted to a legion of writers, for her concern in psychological states, her reach of lyrical heights and the attainment of keen sensibilities. Oates's stories in Marriages and Infidelities variously imitate, extend or parody well known stories by Joyce ("The Dead"), Chekhov ("The Lady with the pet dog"), Kafka ("Metamorphosis"), and James ("The Turn of the Screw"). G.F. Waller elucidates that in all these instances "characters are regrouped, perspectives are shifted, thematic concentrations developed, or form and tone parodied." Oates is aware, not only the debt a contemporary writer owes to her great predecessors but also of her role as an articulator of the shared mystery of human sensitivity.16

16 G.F. Waller, Dreaming America, p.67.
Oates reveals, streaks of Theodore Dreiser in extending the American naturalism to her fiction. Elizabeth Janeway while comparing Oates with Dreiser, writes that "her writing is clumsy in places as his was (though less clumsy in language) inhabited by strong vivid characters—ordinary, unromantic, but thoroughly alive." In projecting the conflicting issues of religion, sexuality, and violence, Oates invokes Flannery O'Connor. In depicting the American middle class notions of the sexual turmoil, she walks in the footsteps of John Updike. She shares James Agees' reverence for the terror and friality of childhood. There are intimations of Steinbeck in her subject matter and its oppressive air. Oates seems to belong to a distinct female tradition of insight and imagination, opposing the male tradition of Hemingway and Mailer, who present the writer as an aggressive character. Like Mailer, Oates is in the thick of things, highly vulnerable to various sensations. She admires Mailer for his spirit of maintaining an intellectual distance, seeking all the while, the centres of action. With all the avowed admiration for Mailer, Oates seems to possess a totally different personality.

She reveals Tolstoy's sense of history drowning the individual, and his passion for fatalism. She emulates Styron, and Malamud in revealing a keen interest in the common place. While endorsing Philip Roth, Oates only turns away from his parody. Viewing the present from the old fashioned angles, Oates appears to be in the loyal company of Singer. Dynamically representing the Age, Oates is deeply indebted to her peers in the field, and devoutly, honours tradition. Oates gratefully mentions in all modesty, "I couldn't exist without them. I don't have much autonomous existence, nor does any one? We are interconnected -- It seems we are individual and separate, where as in fact we are not." Oates seems to endorse Eliot stressing the tradition. "No poet, nor artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead." In a soft matter of

18 Walter Clemons, Newsweek, December 11, 1972, pp.73-74

fact voice of a young girl, Oates informs an interviewer, that she has written stories taking off from Chekhov, Joyce and even Thoreau. She considers Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus as a worthy accomplishment. "I am always reading Mann in utter admiration, in love. Ah to be able to write like Thomas Mann...or even to write a novel Mann might approve of, even mildly..."20

Oates knows that there is no originality in much of literature. The apparent literary antecedents noticed, help to explain the strength and weakness in Oates's work. Oates as an artist, reveals these shared emotions through her dreams, evoking plot, character, setting, theme and style from her own artistic impulse.

This brief outline of the writer's personality, highlighting her formative years and creative habits, is meant to present an insight into the artist. Oates's personality, which is quite distant and altogether very different from the created works of fiction, is indeed subtle and exquisite, worthy of a deeper and concentrated study. She reveals her versatility, cultivating a writer's personality, with a magnificent publishing record, and health

creative roots. She has not confined her creative activity to fiction alone. She has demonstrated her intense enthusiasm to practice all major modes of literature.

VERSATILITY:

As a Poet: Oates's greatness as a fiction writer is much too evident now. The study of her publishing record suggests, that Oates is sharpening her fictional intellect with frequent excursions into poetry, drama and literary criticism. This pause in fictional practice, while opting for other modes of literature deems to help Oates, not only in demonstrating her many splendidored imagination but also in offering an opportunity to detail the direction and strength of her literary practice. Oates's prolific and dynamic fiction, appears to have prejudiced her critics and readers alike. Concentrating on her fictional capabilities, they have almost excluded her unique poetic talent. Despite publishing many volumes of poetry, some of her critics still feel that, she is primarily a fiction writer, only repeating her concerns in an inferior poetry. Helen Vendler locating the problems of untruth and abstraction of situation, proceeds to seek ironically the strength of Oates's fiction in her poetry. 21

criticism and defending Oates, Peter Stevens comments that "such a criticism fails to recognize that the poet is exploring a nebulous region beyond the realities of her fictional world," and he adds "Oates's probing the states of consciousness does not necessarily require a narrative context."  

Objectively examining Oates's poems, G.F. Waller explains that her poems "are often jagged and metrically uncertain, and sometimes overpacked with superfluous words; but frequently they can crystallise with electrifying clarity inexplicable moments of experience on the edge of fear, despair, terror, or joy." 

Oates differs from the contemporary poets endowed with a unique visionary perception. She expresses her admiration for the visionary writers like Lawrence and O'Connor who are "attempting to locate images adequate to the unshaped, unconscious horrors they sense." They see life clearly yet they manage to affirm even while facing "the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch." They use their art "to somehow transform what is given," the "unshaped, unconscious horrors" of our time. Oates vocalises her desire to move from the scattered and seemingly unrelated details to a harmonious

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23 G.F. Waller, Dreaming America, p.2
whole. (NHNE. 7) She reveals in "The Hostile Sun, The Poetry of D.H. Lawrence" her fascination for the overall ambience in Lawrence's poetry commenting on the "protean nature of reality" and the faith in the "transformable quality of all life." (NHNE. 45) In Oates's poetry "becoming" is more visible than "being." She expresses, in unambiguous terms, her preference for the 'heightened moments' which transcend reality. She cleverly relates the poetry of Sylvia Plath to Lawrence and Dickey, presenting moments that make life more possible and fulfilled. Oates's first volume of poetry Anonymous Sins and Other Poems (1969) records such moments of personal intensity. Peter Stevens writes that this volume raising fundamental questions about the quality of life, establishes Oates's poetic ambiance. 24 The title poem while revealing the assumption of vision, also describes the inability to find an exact form for that vision. The central theme is "they are history"—the 'they' representing the ritual heroes, trapped in their obscure destinies. Their removal from meaningful existence and their ignorance of the forces to fight, ultimately lead them to the 'anonymous sins'.

strikingly suggesting the insignificance of all action. The poems represent the conflicts of life elevated to ritualistic pattern. Organised around a parallel structuring, they thoroughly unsettle the reader. Oates depicts the meagreness and meaninglessness of contemporary life, without a permanance. The collection attempts to transcribe Kafka's conception of history, in depicting the loss of overall vision of life in the contemporary man. Oates contends that the means to transcend this emptiness is also in the reach of man. Oates, while seeking a focus for many of her thematic concerns in this volume, also represents her people striving for heightened and intense moments, sometimes, getting destroyed by the brutal reality.

Oates's *Love and Its Derangements* (1970) discusses the ambivalence of human love in relation to the mundane existence. Jeromy Mazzaro comments that "If one theme of *Anonymous Sins and other Poems* was the inability to get out of one self except through the stereotypes of society, the theme of Joyce Carol Oates's second book of poems *Love and Its Derangements*, is the difficulty of Sartrean intersubjectivity--of getting others to accept an individual as he conceives of himself." Mazzaro
proceeds to suggest that this central theme is expressed through an examination of "the uneasiness, struggles and readjustments, that lovers make to compensate for the changes in themselves and their lives." The title poem describes the dehumanizing and vicious force that communicates between male and female. The poem concludes with the sense of eroding of the female self. The title of the poem while suggesting the essential duality in the alternate visions, asserts that love is not always deranged. With an epigraph from Byron, "Passion is the element in which we live; without it, we hardly even vegetate," this volume includes poems, expressing the idea of love as a shattering experience, ultimately moving to a calm when the passion itself becomes the equivalent of those intense moments in the flux of living.

Angel Fire (1973) Oates's another collection continues the examination of love that was central to the earlier volumes. Oates indicates, a positive desire to view poetry as a unity. She divides the book in sections each with its own title and each adding its weight to the total concept. The poem, "Firing the Field," dedicated

to the memory of Flannery O'Connor, provides a clue to
the atmosphere of the collection. When O'Connor suggests
in her fiction "the necessity of succumbing to the divine,
through violence, that is immediate and irreparable, her
characters initiated into a vision of reality, through
ceremonial, almost ritualistic devices," Oates attempts
to secularize the struggle of the individual finding the
meaning of self in a sense of isolation. Oates describes
this strife as a "dynamic struggle of the conscious ego or
self to maintain its individuality against the raging forces
of the primitive unconscious and the highly repressive re-
servoir of civilization" (NHNE: 150-151). This poem
perceiving the extraordinary felicity vested in human
history, makes the spiritual accessible through the physical
reality. Passion is viewed as a mystical bridge between the
micro and macro cosmic worlds offering a means of transcen-
dence.

In The Fabulous Beasts (1975), Oates concentrates on
the immediacy of the physical world, though the book
depicts a bleakly deterministic view in the earlier sections,
it moves in the later part in a more affirming direction.
The title poem is a frightening depiction of the terrors of
life, charting the emergence of history in every day event... The notion of the validity of an event, and its distortion is a central theme of the book. It is structured around the images and phrases expressing speed, flux, the gulf between the event and its distortion, the search for meaning and significance. Oates endeavours to suggest, that the significance of life may be achieved, through a totally experienced personal life, rather than the renunciation. Oates reveals her grasp of an essentialist rather than an existential view of living, promoted by Kafka and O'Connor. She writes "man does not create his soul through free acts but is instead given a soul with which he must live, however unsuitable it may be" (NHNE.147-148). There are poems in the collection on rape, suicidal fears, robbery, breakdown of love, parting of friends, death and travel intelligently exposing a waste-land of insignificance. These poems nonetheless suggest that the immediate life, though appearing as quite mundane, alone can provide opportunities for new beginnings.

The next volume Women whose lives are Food, Men whose lives are Money (1978) completes the themes first announced in the Anonymous Sins and elaborated in the
other books. Though this volume is riddled with the details of the remorseless insignificance of life emphasizing the physical decay and the sense of loss, it indicates the possibilities for change and rebirth. It emphatically suggests that Man must continue challenging his fears and his own demons, till a living balance is established.

Oates's poetry stresses the idea of transcendence. It asserts that the intensity of experience is possible, even in the midst of triviality. Peter Stevens wisely comments that "the form of poetry enables Joyce Carol Oates to intensify her vision of human possibility by freeing herself from the demands of narrative and realistic plausibility." It is an expression in poetic terms of what she herself calls the "sense of the mystery and sanctity of the human predicament." 

As a dramatist: Oates's dramatic career was ignited by The Sweet Enemy (1965), her four charactered play which ran for a short time in off Broadway. Her next play


Sunday Dinner (1970) is an attempt in Absurdist School. It narrates the story of a family abandoned by the father. Subsequently the members of the family suffer the death of the adored mother. They visit her grave in a ritualistic fashion every Sunday. They sit down usually to a ritual dinner after the visit. Though the members despise each other, they vehemently express their loyalty to their dead mother. Each of them has a secret of a 'sin'. Their ritual meal one Sunday gets interrupted by the arrival of a census-taker, a blindman in rags. He narrates his tortured past describing Oates's penchant for the extended self. He convinces them that he is their father. He affirms that all of them are equally guilty. One by one all the members of the family as if in a ritual, confess their sins, each vying with the other to prove himself the most culpable. They take pride in their respective 'sins,' though none of which is particularly heinous. The youngest of the family tears the blindman's eyes out, expecting a transformation to his self. He endeavours to achieve a new identity in the family. But to his dismay he finds himself not altered a bit. Oates while suggesting the concept of the 'Original Sin' emphasizes that a fresh sin has no effect on the reality in the general scheme of things.
Oates's next drama *Ontological Proof of My Existence* (1972) was performed at the Cubiculo Theater, a small off Broadway house of drama. Jack Kroll styling it a "little fire cracker of a closet drama," describes that this play like so much of Oates's work has the disquieting super bright clarity of a dream that appears to be the reality of people's lives. He continues that this drama "vibrates with the danger and apocalyptic exhilaration of the City." 28 This work must be considered like everything Oates writes, as a direct eruption from her strange, disturbing and powerful sensibility. She says the central character is a young girl held in some kind of captivity, by Peter more psychic than physical. He brutalises her and also supervises her marriage with Martin Raven. All male characters in the play, including her father crushingly descend upon her. She becomes the vortex of their needs and fantasies. Oates reveals in their drama her preoccupation with violence and extremity, endorsing what Alfred Kazin said the "sweetly brutal sense of what American experience is really like." 29 Her next work *Miracle Play* (1973) was presented by the New Phoenix Repertory Company. It encompasses a violence enough to successfully make a Revenge

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Tragedy. Set in Harlem it deals with a drug and blood feud, between two black families, the law being the third force. Oates often mentions that she owes a great deal to Ionesco, who released her from the conventional realism.

As a Literary Critic: Oates makes her critical writing, imaginative and revealing, dynamically varying the range of her subjects from Shakespeare to Beckett. Her essays provide passionate commentaries on her own fiction and the particular work under scrutiny. As products of a creative mind, they are made keener and convincing by her wide scholarship. They describe her concern for the vision and content of individual works of literature. Oates seeks to penetrate the aspects of reality in human experience.

Oates's first collection of critical essays The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic forms in literature (1972) reiterates the thesis, that most literature deals consciously or unconsciously with the problem of reality. It enquires what is real in the world, which values are genuine, which without foundation and therefore false or evil. Oates elaborates on this concern in each of her nine formally constructed critical essays on assortment of writers. Bonnie M. Mesinger in her
Dissertation writes that Oates's "concern with 'reality' is primarily philosophical and principally existential; support and explication are drawn from the writings of Kafka, Kierkegaard, Kant, Jaspers and Nietzsche." 30 Oates's interest in the philosophical treatment of reality in literature grew from a belief that "art was rational at bottom, that it could be seen to 'make sense' that it had a definite relationship with philosophical inquiry, though its aim was not necessarily to resolve philosophical doubt." 31 Oates contrasts in these essays the 'existential' and 'essential' attitudes towards the nature of the world and the condition of Man. The existential view according to Oates, highlights the fact that Man is in the process of 'becoming' through his senses because faith, and intuition are no more credible in this world. The essentialist point of view in contrast, stresses at the reality of the spirit in the possibility

30 Bonnie M. Mesinger, Dissonance and Indeterminacy in the critical writings and Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates: Implications for the Interpreter, Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to the Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 1977, p.22.

of transcendence and the a priori existence of the value system. This collection represents Oates's concern for the confrontation between appearance and reality, the role of language and the place of idealism and spirit in an existential world. The theme of primacy of language is extended further to discussions on Chekhov and Ionesco. Contrasting the essentialist viewpoints of Yeats and Mann with Melville, Oates's criticism proceeds to identify and clarify the world views and the possible limits of man's position in the world with in specific literary works. Oates writes, "the greatness of a work of art usually blinds us to the fact that it is a hypothetical statement about reality - a kind of massive, joyful experiment done with words, and submitted to one's peers for judgement." 32

The preoccupations with the questions of reality through philosophical and psychological inquiry, led Oates into metaphysical realms. Her interest in literature appears to concentrate on two areas, one the tragic awareness of isolation and separation, and the other, the visionary perception of Unity and Harmony. Oates's

New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature (1974) persevered to capture the visions most conducive to survival and growth, seriously subscribing to the moral intentions of art. Oates writes in The Writer: "If art has any general evolutionary function it must be to enhance the race, to work some how towards an essential unity and harmony - survival and growth - and perhaps an integration of the human world with the natural world." Oates studies in this volume, the writers who have cultivated a mystical and intuitive perception of unity and harmony in the fictional setting. In Oates's opinion, they made the "furthest reaches of the dreaming mind" easily accessible even to ordinary readers. The most significant idea permeating Oates's critical essays is the nature of the self. In her "Myth of the Isolated Artist," already quoted, Oates expresses the belief that Man is not isolated from other men or from nature. Art works as a product of a vast, collective venture in which the individual is only a leading spirit, not the actual force behind the creation. Oates argues that the attitude to nurture a sense of isolation is destructive.

both to the artist and the society. She suggests "It is time for psychology to take very seriously the propositions advanced by all the great mystics— that the 'Self' is a part of larger reservoir of energy, call it any name you like. As long as the myth of separate and competitive "selves" endure, we will only have a society obsessed with adolescent ideas of being superior, of conquering, of destroying nature." Oates moves away from her earlier avowed occupation with such notions on art. She is content with her concern for tragic vision in the first volume and in the second collection she favours a regard for the deeper and more inclusive reality of the visionary experience. The second volume takes its title from a poem by D.H. Lawrence, whom Oates praises as "one of our true prophets, not only in his madness for the unknown... but in his life long development of a technique, a fictional and poetic way in which the prophetic voice can be given formal expression."

(OA NE.42.)

Oates intimates to her interviewers that her own work springs from a dreamlike world. She expresses her desire to transcend through her literary practice. She

34 Oates, "The Myth of the Isolated Artist," p.74
announces "Private dreams have no interest for other people, the dream must be made public, by using one's wit." 35 Beginning with the treatment of isolation in Beckett, Oates in this collection attempts to trace the social relationships in Henry James and Virginia Woolf and the transcendent vision of Flannery O'Connor, which according to Oates provides the satisfaction for her literary quest. She mentions in an interview just before the publication of New Heaven, New Earth, that this critical book deals with a "Modern tragic consciousness, the artist's awareness in the times of alienation of the self from a larger community and from the natural world." 36 After recognizing the greatness of Plath, Mailer and Dickey for articulating "the very worst... the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch," Oates expresses a rapport with Lawrence and Kafka based upon their rejection of the isolated ego and their affirmation. Oates praises Kafka who persistently endeavoured to synthesise the perennial world of the unconscious, where no dichotomies exist and where


particular relationships are plain myths. Her grasp of these visionary writers illumines the relationships of the self with the unconscious. Refusing to accept the unique and the lonely personality as expressed by Plath, rejecting the rituals of dominance and submission as evoked by Mailer and Dickey, Oates ultimately opts for the self-actualizing visions of Lawrence and Kafka. Oates conscientiously shapes her fiction according to the principles she so spontaneously expresses. Oates's rhetorical writings might help us in having a better and balanced assessment of the artist's endeavour.

The study attempting to suggest in brief, the philosophy, Oates so diligently observes and so meticulously cultivates in giving her fiction an address, proceeds to investigate her unique and energetic practice. Oates's felicity as a fiction writer can better be studied through the choice of literary schools of thought she makes, while delineating a unique tragic vision. The analysis of Oates as a practitioner of Naturalistic literary thought immediately following, is to touch on the central nerve, stimulating the writer's creative reflexes.
As a Practitioner of Literary Naturalism:

The Precept: Naturalism emphasises the unity of spirit and nature. It affirms the blend of intuition and scientific investigation in approaching reality. Towards the close of the Nineteenth Century, the American transcendentalism produced two rivers of thought, one approaching the spirit through intuition, and the other approaching nature through science. The offspring Naturalism, reflects a characteristic spirit flowing in both streams, partly defying nature and partly submitting to it.

Charles Darwin while challenging the prevailing biological opinion of the immutability of species also questioned the teleological concepts of 'purpose' and 'design' in the Universe. He emphasized Man's animal nature shaking the very foundations of religion and morality. The works of Comte, Darwin and Newton suggested that Man could be completely accounted for by physical, psychological and social facts. Scientific explorations further revealed depths, that were repellent in man's nature. The themes and motifs and forms and styles of literary naturalism originated from the eternal tension between the ideal of perfect unity and the brutal facts of experience. Determinism, survival, violence and taboo appear to be the major
themes and motifs of Naturalism. The theme of determinism describes the idea, that natural law and socio-economic influences are more potent than the human will. The theme of survival fastening man to physical roots suggests that survival is the supreme motive in animal life. The theme of violence results from the transfer of emphasis from tradition to survival. This idea of survival led to the explorations of the aggressive instinct, culminating in the discovery of psychic under currents. Sex, disease, bodily functions, obscenity and a host of topics considered as improper for literary representation constituted the themes of taboo. Walcutt mentions that naturalistic novel assumes clinical, panoramic, slice-of-life, stream of consciousness and the chronicle of despair forms.37

The fountain head of naturalism, Émile Zola and his closest American follower Frank Norris were emphatic that naturalism was romantic rather than realistic. Walcutt considers Zola's Germinal and Norris' McTeague as naturalistic in philosophy, romantic in effect, and realistic in style.38 The term naturalism was used to indicate a philosophical orientation, romanticism to

37 Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, a divided stream (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1956) p.21.

38 Ibid, p.22
indicate extreme intensities of effect, and realism, to suggest the apparent fidelity through style, to details of objects, manners or speech.

Walcott mentions in his great work that Art is anthropocentric, created by men whose dominant concern is to domesticate the physical universe to the use of man's spirit. This aim is accomplished by the artist's attempts to impose patterns of human thought upon the eternal complexity of the physical universe. No matter, how ardently he appears to deny the worth of man, the autonomy of the will, the permanance of life and the significance of man's spirit and knowledge he is always affirming these very things. ³⁹ Naturalism can also be explained as an attempt to deflate the fraudulent romanticism.

When man los the faith in human values and when a culture suppresses man's most basic instincts reducing his enthusiasm in future the, 'brutal' expression becomes the ultimate in communication. Kafka mentions that "the truth is always an abyss. One must as in a swimming pool dare to dive from the quivering spring board of trivial everyday experience and sink into the depths, in

³⁹ Ibid. p.29.
order to rise again laughing and fighting for breath - to the now doubly illuminated surface of things."40

One perceives an emotional intensity and a pure classic beauty in a school of thought that has more or less captured the very life breath of post modern American literature. Rising from a social impulse, the literary naturalism emerged in America in the period of intense social consciousness after the civil war in 1960. 

The Practice: Summoning the deterministic forces of Freud, Marx and Darwin and applying all the features of romantic imagination in her fiction, Oates appears to be the representative of the latest manifestation of literary naturalism. Life at the most elemental state fascinates her. Oates creates characters always at war with the oppressive forces displaying a concern for the economic reality. They dream, lust, prey and crave for a higher existence. They persistently seek liberation from the tight hold of the present. Perceiving the temporal as the manifestation of the eternal, Oates endeavours to expose the temporal situation. Oates regards Lawrence as a visionary, for translating the ferocious eternity and the uncontrollable 'otherness of nature' into his prophetic work. Oates like a romantic,

40 Gustav Janouch, Conversations with Kafka, trans., Goronwy Rees (New York: New Directions, 1971) p.155
perceives and represents the condition of disharmony in nature and reality, promoting the assertion of the will. She makes her protagonists assert themselves against fate, time and accident with an unshakable faith in life. When the dissociated modern self is venturing to escape the confines of its 'ego', Oates like Harriet Arnow Simpson, makes her economically oppressed characters passionately seek a permanent identity in sheer naturalistic settings. Oates contends that tragedy is not for cathartic purpose, "but to deepen our sense of the mystery and sanctity of the human predicament." (NHNE 102) The naturalistic writer of Oates's mould craves to render the reality, hypothesising the 'interior randomness' thereby reflecting the external chaos and flux. Emulating Flannery O'Connor, Oates perceives the unconscious as the determining force in the tangible surreal and primitive world. Oates evidently watches the contemporary civilization, seeking fulfilment through conquest, revealing clearly the symptoms of paranoia. In order to capture life in its entirety, Oates lifts the chaotic surroundings to aesthetic reaches demonstrating her requisite sensibilities.

With the publication of Upon the Sweeping Flood (1966) and A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) the tradition to
compare Oates with Theodore Dreiser gained momentum. The reviewers noticed definite signs of naturalistic conception of man's biological and psychological determinism, in Oates's work, as in Dreiser. The detailed scenes of rural and urban desolation replete in her fiction reflects an authentic feeling for the terrifying presence of poverty. G.F. Waller explains that this representation reflects "the emotional poverty and psychological confusion of her characters and attempt...to set up reverberations of discomfort and alienation in her readers."41 Perceiving man placed in a universe, he can neither avoid, transcend nor control, Oates makes her characters opt for marriage, job and some such familiar devise seeking redemption from a chaotic and fearful environment. They are made to compromise the freedom of their 'will' caught in a terrible conflict with all the known forces. Donald Pizer, describing the late Nineteenth Century American naturalism, suggests a distinction between an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience constituting the theme and form of naturalistic novel. "A naturalistic novel is thus an

41 G.F. Waller, Dreaming America, p.88.
extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature." Oates appears to deftly blend the realistic detail. With a rare melodrama revealing the passion, lying beneath despair. While reverting her characters to the animal, driving them to be just flesh, Oates also endows them with unique capabilities, to rise above the rut, seeking self-actualization. Like Chekhov and the other Absurdist, Oates remains true to her subject — life, refusing to reduce her art to a single emotion. Appreciating Kafka, Oates announces "that in reality we always win. Our victories are assured" and "In reality in nature — they have won" (NHNE 268).

Oates's first published novel With Shuddering Fall (1964) introduces the idealized characters — a God like paternal figure Herz, his virginal and religious minded daughter Karen, and the violent rebel Shar. Oates wrote this highly emotional and extraordinarily poetic novel, at the age of twenty six, while at the College, feeling the very quiver of nerves with the dramatization of the central characters. With this novel, Oates

ventures to establish many of the directions and themes that were to influence her later work. She considers this novel as a religious work with a theme of obedience and love, to transcend the dichotomy of good and evil. Set in the north-west hills of Eden County, the landscape leaps into life as Oates describes the people and the barrenness of their lives. Eden is not a paradise and it in fact appears as a Hall to its inhabitants. Its name evokes not an innocent world but a reminder of what the inhabitants have lost resulting in their spiritual poverty. The title of the novel deriving from the last line of the poem by George Meredith questions, why one should fall "With Shuddering" into the breast of death, since both death and life are gifts of the same spirit of nature. Both heredity and environment together play a cruel role in the formation of Oates's characters in this novel. She succeeds in creating a world where people are killers at heart, with rising waves of desire and love engulfing them, desperately preventing their redemption. Oates deliberately invokes the deicides like rape, car wreck, murderous confrontations, enraged love making, death, miscarriage, race riot and even mental derangement, to provide a naturalistic setting to the drama of emotions.
A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) along with Expensive People and them makes a trilogy of American life from the late twenties to the late sixties. The novel opens powerfully with the point of view of the child Clara, responding to the chaotic world of migratory workers. This fourth book of Oates chronicles Clara Walpole's rise from rags to riches. Born into poverty, she makes an instinctive struggle to escape the squalid, migratory, labour environment. She longs to become respectable, seeking love in a world, where survival amounts to the satisfaction of primary desires. Clara suffers from a painful notion that life is nasty and a frightening dream. She is institutionalised ultimately losing the control over her will. Richard Clark Sterne, writes that Oates makes her "Characters whether migrant farm workers or men of property, move and have their restless being in a kind of torture garden that we see as through shattered glass." He considers this novel as a "Penetrating examination of American sickness as the best work of Dreiser, Fitzgerald or Faulkner."43 Library Journal reports that a "talented novelist has turned a strong searchlight on the lives of the migratory workers in the United States. The opening scenes are grim and powerful, delineating the brutalization caused by

43 Richard Clark Sterne, "Visions of Rural America," The Nation, April 1, 1968, p.448-450.
migratory life..." Rose Mary Burwell, announces that this novel since its publication in 1966 has been unanimously regarded as a work in the realistic, naturalistic tradition of Steinbeck, Dreiser, Cather and Ferber. Elizabeth Janeway suggests that this work is "more like Dreiser's than that of any one else." She respects Oates's approach to describe a social world for "it is a large and astonishing world demanding Dreiser's reach as well as the solidarity."46

Them (1969) is a thoroughly naturalistic novel for its depiction of the brutal facts about the urban squalor. Considering the 1930s as the world of her parents, Oates chooses Depression that has seriously disturbed and affected their lives, as the central symbol of dislocation in this novel. It is set in Detroit, that "hole with a horizon." (T.264), "a kind of stretched out hole" (T.232) into which one journeys "deeper and deeper without coming to any centre" (T.80) It sweeps through two generations.

44 May belle Lacey, review A Garden of Earthly Delights by Joyce Carol Oates, Library Journal June 1, 1967, p.2180.
45 Rose Mary Burwell, "Joyce Carol Oates and an old Master," Critique 15.1 p.48.
spanning thirty years in the history of a squalid midwestern family. Loretta Wendall and two of her children - Maureen and Jules are the 'them', the passive humans. Like Zola, Oates ventures in this novel to know the essence of poverty, not simply to record its manifestations, nor even to encourage reform but to test her convictions against the pervading horror of history. The Wendalls represented in this novel are not, merely the victims of economic and social disorder. Oates endeavours to turn them into convincing representatives of man's tragic conflict between self expression and self-restraint. Oates attempts to understate the various sordid and shocking details of slum life, very much elaborated by other naturalistic writers, fearing too much reality prejudicing the interests of the novel. Barbara A. Bannon considers this novel "in its own intense way," An American Tragedy. 47 L.E. Sisman mentions that his novel "succeeds in reproducing the psychological tenor of poverty - a series of stultifying routines interrupted irregularly and arbitrarily, by radical change and blinding violence - and its stunting effect on the emotional scope of the poor. Miss Oates is a

writer of daring, discipline, and talent." 48 Guy Davenport notices the purity of tone, achieved by Oates in this novel raising the question of naturalism and reality. He records that "them is a novel of heart breaking power with its theme of loss of promise in young lives and the awful repetition of squalor and misdirection. Miss Oates demonstrates that life which has reverted to barbarism within the city is a more terrible barbarism than any outside civilization." 49 Critics mention that readers see in them, a clinically objective case history in social psychology, a chronicle of existence in the Detroit slums, worthy of Dickens. For documenting the brutalities of "ghetto" with rare imagination and sharp focus, and in recognition of the unsurpassed ability Oates displays in developing the novel, them received the National Book Award for Fiction in 1969.

When Henry James and Virginia Woolf express their concern for interior details disregarding the exterior, Oates differs, with her distinct practice in high-lighting the interior details corresponding to the external environment. She varies her practice from the conventional

naturalists who cared more for the external details. Oates searches for an access into the interior while exploiting the exterior to maximum fictional advantage. The tangible situation perhaps reminds Oates often of the interior reality. It evidently offers an opportunity to capture the pure and uninhibited state of consciousness. While presenting a study on Harriet 'now Simpson, Oates calls for a representation of the total world - with the external and internal details alone constituting naturalism (NHNE.110). There is a sense of place and history in Oates's fiction, sincerely attempting to capture the spirit of a society at a crucial point in history.

Endowed with the qualities of enterprise and ingenuity, Oates is a dynamic literary personality. Her work cannot be considered as a mere extension of naturalism. Her interest and practice in this exquisite mode cannot be misinterpreted as the evidence of naturalism singled out for particular reverence. Literary nomenclature remains just a convenient way of classifying groups of writers, sharing common assumptions and techniques.

Thus an attempt has been made in the present chapter to capture Oates's endeavour in providing directions to her literary career, particularly as a fiction writer.
Oates's versatility examined in this chapter only strengthens the belief that Oates is conscientiously working to cultivate a unique literary stance. As an introductory division of the thesis, this discussion attempts to represent the total image of Oates. It is felt that without the proper assessment of critical response to Oates's writing, the exercise in tracing the impact of Oates on contemporary literary society might be incomplete.

Review of critical comment: Bonnie M. Mesinger's learned work already quoted in this thesis provides an exhaustive coverage to this aspect of Oates's literary career. Oates is fortunate in having a generally favourable and uniformly encouraging critical response. There is a flood of academic and professional critical reviews on Oates, though the appearance of seasoned scholarly book length studies on this great writer of the times is yet, slow and sparse. A review of a work, though limited in scope and depth, nonetheless subtly reveals the major concerns of a writer. The critical comment resulting from the reviews can be considered as the documents of the author's impact on contemporary literary sensibility. These reviews are quite revealing in their assessment of Oates's accomplishments and suggest the elements of development and consistent aspects of the author's work.
The reviews of By the North Gate/Oates's sense of place, the apt employment of the dialect and her talent to blend realism and poetry, suggest a world, beyond the rural environment. Oates is recognised as a 'regionalist, compared often with the southern women writers. Stanley Kaufmann's comment that Oates seemed "determined to prove that the 'southern' story can be written in the North," is characteristic.  

The early reaction to violence Oates represents is mainly encouraging. Haskel Frankel while finding violence central to the stories in By the North Gate, did not consider it as Oates's sole concern.  

With Shuddering Fall, received a condemning response from James McConkey. He vehemently objected to the gratuitous acts of disorder, Oates represents in a manner reminiscent of Erskine Caldwell. This expression of strong dislike appears to have stemmed from Oate's choice of rural, unsophisticated and extremely ignorant characters and her objective presentation. The reviewer expressed his concern over Oates's tight control on character and situation.


52 James McConkey, "Notes Reviews and Speculations," review of With Shuddering Fall by Joyce Carol Oates in Epoch, 14 (Winter 1965) p.186.
anticipating Elizabeth Janeway, who focussed on the "excluded alternatives." Janeway while generally favourable to *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, expressed her grief that Oates did not go beyond the fictionalizing of sociological case studies. The reviewer described Oates, consistently minimising the role and scope of the omniscient narrator, forcing her characters to reveal themselves.

Noticing a pervading atmosphere of 'hysterical terror in *Expensive People*, some of the reviewers started the tradition of addressing the fiction of Oates as Gothic. Both Granville Hicks and Louis Grant, wrote approvingly of Oates's experimental use of the first person narrative and the thoroughly modern environment.

The publication of *them* was received with dismay, and censure. Guy Davenport felt that this novel "does insist so doggedly on the miserable greyness of life that one begins to see that she is looking at her subject from the outside .... Does the uniform greyness of


54 Granville Hicks, "What is reality?" Review of *Expensive People* by Joyce Carol Oates, *Saturday Review*, October 26, 1968, pp. 33-34.

Miss Oates's prose reflect or hide her subject?"55 Guy Davenport questioned. He explained that the aesthetics of the novel exposed the spirit of naturalism and reality, but Oates's endeavour remained a mere discourse rather than art. The New Yorker reported that Oates reduced the importance of the backgrounds and setting, "discarding circumstantiality." This review detailed the character verismilitude and integrity. With the admiring evaluations already reported in this thesis, reviewers of this novel uniformly stressed a flaw that they could not report.56 Benjamin De Mott reviewed this novel underlining its weak points. He captures the writer's deliberate attempt to distance the characters. He even pinpointed Oates's failure to create an authorial consciousness, transcending the limited consciousness of her characters. He charges the readers of Oates's fiction for reading Oates for a wrong reason.57

Charles Lam Markmann defended Oates's prolificity,


57 Benjamin De Mott, "The Necessity in Art of a Reflective Intelligence," review of them by Joyce Carol Oates, The Saturday Review, November 22, 1969, pp.72,73. 89.
reviewing *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*. He referred the stories as "respectable" and "accomplished." John Ditsky examined Oates's style, characterization, and point of view. He began the essay with the notion that the recent fiction was merely an attempt to challenge the philosophic and aesthetic opinions of conventional fiction. He was convinced that Oates was tonally aligned with the experimentalists, though at the outset seeming so loyal to realistic fiction. He explained, that her fiction shared the concern of the experimentalists with inner states," no longer quite the same as a character's psychology but the fragmented reflection by his mind of the fragmented external environment." Ditsky suggested that while the earlier critics have sought to study Oates, based on the deductive principles of the traditional realistic fiction, the experimental fiction only limited the reader's perception. "New ways of seeking, like new glasses or angles of vision are eternally bound to their user's capacities for enlightenment." When


Michael Wood observed Marriages and Infidelities uneven as revealing Oates, "proposing for themes and forms," Charles Lam Markmann noted a significant new mode in Oates's style. He observed the lack of overt violence and death in the stories, describing simultaneously 'control' and "classic detachment." 60

Critical response to Oates's writing has varied predictably in the past two decades. It serves as a barometer tracing the changes in literary tastes. Critical appreciation of a living writer, though sounds simple and a thrilling prospect, is indeed a complex and nerve-racking venture. In the dearth of full length scholarly studies the available critical works on Oates often tend to be coloured with the common fallacies. Sincerity in critical evaluation is imperative, particularly when the writer is extremely prolific, often shedding all subjective compunctions. Oates mentions that "Criticism is perhaps, the highest art form being a highly provocative, outrageous, stunningly original, baffling exasperating but brilliant

contribution to literary thought." (UL.66-67). Oates considers lives as "narratives experienced in the flesh, sometimes in flesh that comes alive only with pain, but they are recollected as poems, lyrics, condensed, illuminated by a few precise images."(CB.33) Oates by herself a renowned academic critic, whose contribution to critical thought has been studied in the present thesis appears to consider that, it is the critics' duty to filter these 'precise images' while analyzing and appreciating a contemporary writer. Her critical reputation would definitely profit from the recent book length studies of great understanding. Oates's own explanation provides an illuminating study. "Every person dreams and every dreamer is a kind of an artist. The formal artist is one who arranges his dreams into a shape that can be experienced by other people. There is no guarantee that art will be understood, not even by the artist, it is not meant to be understood but to be experienced." 61

Literary Prolificity: Oates is abundantly prolific and energetically versatile. She is hard working and austere, keeping the central ambitions of literature alive and in perfect temper. Her productivity terrifies her critics. Her 'dazzling talent' and 'demonic imagination' have

earned her, peculiarly, much animosity. Oates's name on@mentioned with reverence is now spoken often in jest. Her problem, critics feel is too much writing in too little time. Some of the critics have extended an irreverent and impertinent deal without sympathetically considering her natural felicity. Sanford Pinsker started the attack in 1973 with the remark that "her protagonists were primitive, her themes basic... and Miss Oates's early reviewers beat a non-existent horse when they insisted that she was a John Steinbeck revisited." The reviewer even suggested playfully that by all the laws of literary logic, the work of Joyce Carol Oates like that of Isaac Bashevis Singer should not exist.62 The same critic in 1979, confided that her fiction retains a solid old fashioned ring when her peers are straining toward innovations. He mentions that 'Prolific' is an inadequate term to describe the range and sheer quantity of her publication. He rounded off his review with a confident comment that the fears of the critics in Oates's burning self out early, are not only unfounded, but, a bit silly. By then Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize

Walter Sullivan found fault with her chaotic art tracing the chaotic world. He believed that art while imitating life, does not become a carbon copy and the writer's primary task is to maintain control over the material. He argued, when good and evil are replaced by the 'sick' and the 'well' it will be the death of art. He considered Oates's novels "a little less exciting, a little more repetitive," in spite of her great technical proficiency. He continued to pronounce the same judgement even in 1977 by saying that "surely she is writing far too much: surely she owes herself and us more discipline."

"No, her problem is not talent: it is temperament, the defect of her leading virtue. Miss Oates is an obsessive, and obsession is a jockey that runs a talent hard but only in one direction," wrote Brad Darrach. He mentioned that every thing this writer does has been done before and done more powerfully by Gogol, Melville and Ingmar Bergman. He remarked that Oates is "the last

of the Nineteenth Century gothic novelists, the fourth Bronte sister an anachronism." He none the less ended his article with an observation that he buys every book she writes. 66 Christopher Ricks noting her choice of one literary mode after another, commented that she has "a talent exasperatingly misguided about itself." 67 Some critics felt that her elusive nature in freeing herself from all sorts of labels tend to make her quite insecure in her medium. Calvin Bedient mentioned that "she is not often at her best and has perhaps published too much, too quickly, been too little self critical. She seems not to know when one or the other of her powers has gone dead." 68 Patricia S. Coyne goes to Oates's defence by saying "when her critics suggest querulously that, she slow down and rewrite I cannot imagine what they have in mind, Stylis-tically she is... irreproachable." 69 Majority of her critics betray a less charitable face, alternating between


amazement at her abundant productivity and worry, about its adverse effects. As more of Oates's cany came to light these critics have reconciled to less antagonistic postures.

Oates can take the critic's barbs, blows and broadsides with a singular nonchalance. Her head is bloody but still unbowed. Her work cannot be the chaotic art at her critics allege, but a record of an intense desire of the artist in articulating the unconscious. Her critics only reveal an indifference to the relentless march of time and of the countless, struggling under its dead weight. She writes that "the function of literary criticism is not simply to dissect either cruelly or reverentially, to attack or to glorify, but to illustrate how the work of significant artist helps to explain, his era and our own."

Oates writes more than a book of Fiction in one year. Usually she writes with enthusiasm, the book she is not going to publish. She finds it difficult to choose which one to publish, writing with such passion and speed. Critics are curious to know how Oates finds time for such

great application and output, she sincerely feels that she in fact, wastes time. She does not consider herself extraordinarily productive, and in a lighter vein mentions that other writers are only less productive. Henry James, Edith Wharton, Charles Dickens and a host of professional writers of yester years were considered natural and prolific. Today, the fact that a writer actually writes, is an oddity. Oates passionately feels that the critics, tired of certain writers, should not read their books and certainly, should not review them with such passion. Oates understands that discipline is better part of artistic survival. Constant application and fearless exposition of the convictions always help the career of an artist. Individual stories or poems, occasionally even books may be relatively weak, but only in the context of the writer's general excellence. There is very little doubt in her sustained high level of achievement. She is writing as instinctively as she breathes. She says 'no' emphatically to those who appeal for silence. Her comment about Lawrence, that he "seems to be writing, always writing, out of the abrupt, ungovernable impulses of his soul," (NHNE.43) aptly describes her own condition. Only through writing, Oates is able to think, feel and realise at the highest pitch. Oates has chosen writing as medium to plunge to the depths,
seeking the truth — that is nine tenths of the ice-berg that lies submerged, beneath the one tenth visible portion called reality.

The study thus far attempted examines the birth and convictions of an artist of great stature. The biographical details and the versatility of creative imagination incorporated with a view to tracing the writer's evolving consciousness. Though Oates did not commit herself to any particular school of literary thought except as a "romantic in the tradition of Stendhal and Proust," her practice reveals her creed, the splendour of the conventional and the liberal blended so exquisitely. As Oates is extremely prolific, close scrutiny of all her fiction in a study with a limited scope, is a near impossible task. The outline studies of some of the works made are to facilitate an intensive observation in order to suggest the priorities and dimensions of the creative endeavour. Her prolificity and versatility promote her kaleidoscopic enthusiasm in all the popular modes of literary thought. Her compulsive obsession with the darker areas of the 'poetry of life' requires a variety of expressions, cultivating an animated and purposeful practice. While the investigation so far attempted, arranges a frequency to
tune in Oates's loyalty to the oft noticed themes in her work, it also emphasizes the fact that the themes of the present study - Love, Death and Anxiety, are, as well the major interests of the American literary psyche in general. The execution and the message of Leslie A. Fiedler's classic *Love and Death in American Novel*, emphatically announce these evident constituents of the American fictional reality. The succeeding division of the thesis attempts to examine the implications of Love on creative philosophy and practice.
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