

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN JOYCE CAROL OATES'S FAMILY TRILOGY

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With the publication of her trilogy, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), and *them* (1969) within three years, Joyce Carol Oates has established herself as one of the major writers in contemporary American literature. Although she deals with three kinds of subject matter in the trilogy—the miserable lives of rural poor immigrants, the materialism and spiritual poverty of suburban upper middle-class, and the struggle for survival of the urban poor—her major concern largely centers on the predicaments of women in American society. More specifically, she probes into the changing images of women in the family with regard to their relatives, including their husbands, lovers, and children.¹ With the exception of Jules in *them*, there are no male characters standing foremost throughout these novels. Her male characters are so pale, incompetent, and inconspicuous that they are relegated to a secondary role in the trilogy. In contrast, her

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¹ The term "family trilogy" is used in Zenobia Mistri's *Joyce Carol Oates: Transformation of "Being" Toward a Center*, Diss. Purdue University 1977 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983), p. vi. In a broader sense, the trilogy deals with the lives of these three classes in specific social milieu respectively. But I adopt this title to highlight the evolution of Oates's women in terms of family lives and connections. See also Cynthia Charlotte Stevens, *The Imprisoned Imagination: The Family in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, 1960-1970*, Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 1974 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), p. 10.

female characters are much more active, vigorous, and aggressive. In order to latch on to the phenomenon of feminine mystique as Oates tellingly depicts in the course of the trilogy, we should know something about her attitude toward her woman folk and the traits of female characters as shown in her works. For example, Clara Walpole of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Nancy Romanow (Nada) of *Expensive People*, and Nadine, Loretta, and Maureen of *them* represent different aspects of feminine mystique as the author perceives them.

Women in Oates's fictional world have many faces; the women we encounter in her novels are humans with flesh and blood living in American society. They have to cope with an important problem: how to survive. Their lives are complicated by the fact that they are internally obsessed with fear and insecurity resulting from marriage, economic dependence, and low social status, and simultaneously they easily fall victims to violence (i.e., harassment, rape, murder) which not only tramples on their dignity as humans but threatens their lives.²

In the past, what was demanded of a woman was to be a responsible mother who could raise children, keep the house clean, and take care of the whole family. Her problem was how to adjust herself to that role, and a feminine personality was taking shape: maternal love, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness. In an article on the fate of women, Oates has observed, "Woman's natural role was one of unquestioning subservience, docility, and sacrifice."³ In addition to these sufferings, modern women are haunted incessantly by nightmares of

² G. F. Waller, *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 18.

³ Joyce Carol Oates, "'At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her': Images of Women in Yeats, Lawrence, Faulkner," *Georgia Review* 37:1 (Spring 1983); rpt. in *The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1983), p. 40. As for the pressure women face within and without, see also Carolyn G. Heilbrum, "Discovering the Lost Lives of Women," *New York Times Book Review*, 24 June 1984, p. 26.

poverty, marital problems, violence, breakdown, and psychoses. Under these circumstances, they are doomed to a tragic, deterministic end.

In *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates*, Mary Kathryn Grant has summed up three kinds of female characters in Oates's canon: despairing, unfulfilled women; destructive women; strong and strenuous women who survive all suffering and perils.⁴ She has built her arguments on the sense of tragedy so obviously present in Oates, this scheme requires placing characters into categories. To apply this formula to the female characters in the trilogy, we can find a common trait of Oates's women: these unhappy women all have a miserable end, even those who survive are mentally or physically exhausted or verging on breakdown. To put it more specifically, Pearl, Maureen in her catatonia, and Clara in the mental hospital fall into the first category; Clara in her prime, Nada, and Nadine belong to the second category; only Loretta and Maureen are included in the third category. Of course, this classification is not absolutely clear-cut, for there are areas of overlap, say, Clara and Maureen play two roles in the list. This phenomenon reflects the fact that Oates's women are in a sophisticated frame of mind subject to change as they undergo ups and downs in real life. In other words, Oates tends to create characters with many facets rather than allot single masks to them throughout the whole play.

In this connection, the traditional categorization of Mary/Eve stereotype falls short in classifying Oates's women for what counts is the means a character takes rather than the result he/she deserves. For instance, Clark, Revere's eldest son, pays a regular visit to Clara in the mental hospital, though she has done much harm to his family. Oates takes pains in probing into the very cause that makes her women what they are, taking into account their upbringing, education,

⁴ Mary Kathryn Grant, *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1978), pp. 26-27.

career, and marriage. As we mentioned before, Mary finds no seat in Oates's works. Similarly, Eve as a prototype of fallen woman is outmoded and inadequate to throw any lights on male/female relations. As a matter of fact, she is overburdened with the condemnation and calumny of contaminating the soul of mankind. It seems that man piles all the blame on woman without reflecting upon his own credulity or gullibility. At best, that stance tells tales about the prejudices and biased judgment patriarchy has held against womanhood. Moreover, impatient with the stereotype of Eve as a wicked woman, some critics even argue that Adam's fall, if anything, is a fortunate one because Eve, with her eloquence, strategy, and determination, first initiates him to the perception of knowledge in terms of "confrontation, struggle, events, time, history, and narrative."⁵

Given that what precedes is sound and valid, it would be significant to study the images of women in the trilogy from the other perspective, that is, to explore women's life by analyzing their attributes in terms of three biblical archetypes: Salome (the femme fatale; enchantress), Jael (murderess), and Bathsheba (defiled woman converting into queen). The function of this scheme is to keep each character whole. By juxtaposing these female characters, we will first discuss their traits in their respective social milieus in which they find themselves, then dwell upon the significance of female images in the trilogy and examine Oates's attitude toward the fate of women, and finally arrive at the conclusion that, though Oates does not uphold the cause of feminism in public, she shows her concern for the fate of women in depicting faithfully the reality of the woman's status in a time when women still seem to be the heirs of suffering, affliction, oppression and misunderstanding.

We will first treat Clara and Nada as belonging to the

⁵ Mieke Bal, "Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow: The Emergence of Female Character: A Reading of Genesis 1-3," *Poetics Today*, 6: 1-2 (1985), 36; Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 146-52.

Salome prototype, a femme fatale who stands for lust, desire, destruction and death. For them men are more often than not instrumental in fulfilling whatsoever they desire. A femme fatale, as Virginia M. Allen describes,

is beautiful, erotic, seductive, destructive, exotic. To these we may add self-determined and independent. In addition, throughout the examples runs the theme of an indifferent and chilling remoteness from human feeling. . . . She [is] construed as the woman who control[s] her own sexuality, who seduce[s] men and drain[s] them of their "vital powers," in an exercise of eroticism that ha[s] no issue.⁶

Clara and Nada are typical femmes fatales in the trilogy. "Clara the Climber," as one critic calls her, rises from the daughter of an immigrant worker to the status of landed middle class at the expense of the men around her.⁷ With this in mind, it is easy to explain the reason why the author divided *A Garden of Earthly Delights* into three parts—"Carleton," "Lowry," "Swan"—though the protagonist of the novel is Clara. If we go a step further to analyze her relations to them, we come to detect that they are father, lover, and son, in turn. Why no husband? Isn't Curt Revere her legitimate husband in the eyes of the law?

Metaphorically, Clara preys upon men for the purpose of material gains; she pays no attention to human feeling. Sister Carrie is as well oblivious to Hurstwood's misery as Clara does not care a fig for Revere. As a daughter of a poor immigrant born in the Depression, she does her best to better her condition. It is an ordinary dream for those who live in the shack. But it should be noted that the end should not justify the

⁶ Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), p. 4. Unnamed in the verses she appears (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6: 17-28), Salome is said to be the daughter of Herodias by Herod's brother Philip. The Italian painter Guido Reni (1575-1642) represented the decapitation of John the Baptist by the enchantress, subtitled "Salome with the Head of John the Baptist." See Illustration 8.

⁷ Elizabeth Janeway, "Clara the Climber," rev. of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, by Joyce Carol Oates, *New York Time Book Review*, 10 Sept. 1967, pp. 5, 63.

means. That the Walpoles move from one place to another (Arkansas, Florida, South Carolina, New Jersey) imprints a burning brand of homelessness and restlessness on the mind of the little Clara. Being constantly on the move, she has no opportunity to make friends with her peers, let alone getting along well with other people. When asked about where she comes from, she answers: "We didn't have no particular home. . ." (p. 174), "There wasn't any home" (p. 174), "I don't have any family or anyone. . . ." ⁸ As a matter of fact, she runs away from home after having been beaten by her father for hanging around indecent places. Home is a symbol of tranquility, stability, and security. Traditionally, woman and home are closely connected:

[A]ssociations of security and rest are maintained in all . . . portrayals of good women. "Bad" women, on the other hand, are associated with journeys, with restlessness, with orphans (the loss of home tie), and with quests for self-fulfillment. ⁹

Carleton persists in searching out Clara, for he loves Clara best among his children (*GED*, pp. 20, 23, 126). Stomach ache-ridden and poor in health, he drives thousands of miles in search of the lost daughter—the reversal of Clarissan plot in which a daughter is in quest of a heavenly father. Although there is no causal relation between Carleton's death and Clara's running, one point is certain, that is, Carleton's love for his daughter. Otherwise, what bothers him to have much ado in trying to seek her out? Clara runs away from home via Lowry not for any higher cause or ideal (romantic love, self-identity, spiritual growth), but to escape poverty. Paternal love is no match for material gains. ¹⁰ Blindly grubbing in the world of material gains, she has no value to live by and this bad

⁸ Oates, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1967), p. 174. Further page reference is to this edition and is hereafter cited in parentheses as *GED*.

⁹ Susan K. Harris, "Mark Twain's Bad Women," *Studies in American Fiction*, 13: 2 (Autumn 1985), 158.

¹⁰ See Grant, p. 83.

influence surely exacts its price on her son Swan.¹¹

When she was a schoolgirl, Clara stole a red and white striped flag in front of a mansion; with no money in her pocket, she felt ill at ease in the department store as the saleswoman was beholding her in contempt. These, in one way or another, lead to her cold-blooded materialism, which in turn results in her own ruin. That Clara sets her heart on coveting material gains makes her incapable of love. Her claims that she loves Lowry (*GED*, pp. 134, 157, 158, 227, 234, 264, 328, 340) cannot be taken literally. It is very strange that she uses the metaphor of property to describe her love toward Lowry: "She felt as if love were a condition she would move into the way you moved into a new house. . ." (p. 184). The other side of the coin is that she feels no love for Lowry as he cannot afford a "new house"—a symbol of property, real estate—at the moment when she is pregnant with his baby. Conscious of her beauty, Clara intends to fish for profits out of it as she says, "I want lots of things" (p. 137), "I want to own lots of things" (*GED*, p. 155). With dubious motivation, she gets acquainted with Curt Revere, a land owner who owns a great expanse of farms. She tactically conspires to disinherit his sons and grasp the farms. She expels Revere's eldest son Clark by alluring him to make bold advances to her in drunkenness; she does not tell Revere about Jonathan's truancy. All of these point to taking over Revere's property. More than that, her blatant materialism also contaminates the soul of Swan, her son by Lowry.¹² She repeatedly tells her son that one day he will kick his brothers out the door, so there exists eternal animosity between Swan and his brothers. What is worse, this murderous thought not only causes the death of Robert—Revere's youngest son—by accident, but twists Swan's personality.

That the femme fatale indulges herself in desires has a

¹¹ Maybelle Lacey, rev. of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, by Joyce Carol Oates, *Library Journal* (June 1967), 2180.

¹² Joanne V. Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 53.

double meaning. On the one hand, she possesses an avarice for material gains; on the other, she seduces men for her insatiable carnal pleasure.¹³ Although Clara is less notorious than Nada in sexual activities, she gets loose in a fit of violent passion. For instance, she picks up a stranger in a gas station and makes love with him in the woods; she once left Swan alone in the library and went dating with "a man with tapping fingers" (*GED*, p. 377). The other aspect of the femme fatale, barrenness, is shown by a series of disasters befalling the family after she is married to the Reveres. To begin with, she has a miscarriage when she is three months pregnant with Revere's baby. This symbolizes the futility of their marital relationship—love's toil without fruit. Although she is not directly responsible for the death of Robert, she poisons Swan's mind and makes him a Cain unconsciously. Since childhood, he has been taught to grasp whatsoever his brothers have. Thus, she brings forth destruction not only to Revere's children, but also to her own son, who kills himself after committing patricide.

There are sufficient reasons to juxtapose Nada and Clara on the same level: they are descendants of poor immigrants who strive to climb the social scale; they indulge themselves in the pursuit of excessive desire; and they all have a strong penchant for absolute dominance over their sons. For all that, there exist some differences between them. Born in the Depression, Clara receives little education, while Nada is an acclaimed novelist in the 1960s. Clara is the mistress of a member of the landed middle class; Nada, a suburban matron. Despite these differences on the surface, they share the common traits of the femme fatale: beauty, lust, desire, destructiveness, barrenness, and promiscuity. In his essay "Only Control: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," Robert H. Fossum has clearly stated, "Nada is, in fact, simply a more elegant, imaginative Clara."¹⁴

¹³ See Allen, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ Robert H. Fossum, "Only Control: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in the Novel*, 7 (Summer 1975), 285-97; rpt. in *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), p. 53.

Nada's excessive desires express themselves in her inordinate pursuit of fame and sensual pleasures. By assuming the name of Natashya Romanov, she claims herself descendant of Russian noble emigrés to usurp the high repute of noble house. As a married woman, her full name is Natashya Romanov Everett. She wants her son to call her Nadia instead of mother, but he can only pronounce Nada, which, meaning "nothing" in Spanish, becomes her name throughout *Expensive People*.¹⁵ However, that is not the whole story. At her funeral, her parents talk about her past and expose her disguise. Her real name is Nancy Romanow, the daughter of a poor immigrant born in North Tonawanda, a city in upstate New York. She loses her identity as well as sincerity by assuming too many names. No one has ever come to know her behind the mask, not even her own husband and son. Falsity and affectation lurk in her mind as she is dealing with others.¹⁶ She likes to act as a suburban matron to puff up her megalomania as a writer (though a minor one). Somewhat vain of her three novels, she is active in "the Village Great Books Discussion Club" which proves nothing but a place for literary gossip and a hideout to flirt with men.

Nada's beauty is instrumental in sustaining her extramarital liaisons.¹⁷ Richard mentions his mother time and again as a woman with "shining, smooth face" (p. 33), "a handsome, ageless woman of forty" (p. 113), "My Medusa with snaky ringlets" (p. 118).¹⁸ It is ironic that Nada appears to her son as a beautiful woman rather than a loving mother. Since Nada is only a woman in the eyes of her son, what she does falls

¹⁵ Philomene C. Ducas, *Determinism in Joyce Carol Oates's Novels, 1964-1975*, Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison 1979 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1982), p. 242, 10n. Ducas points out that the association of that name indicates the "substanceless" feature of her identity. In fact, she abnegates the role of a mother.

¹⁶ See Sanford Pinsker, "Suburban Molesters: Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People*," *The Midwest Quarterly*, 19 (Autumn 1977), 89-103; rpt. in *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, pp. 98, 101.

¹⁷ Mistri, p. 51.

¹⁸ Oates, *Expensive People* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1969), p. 33. Further page reference is to this edition and is hereafter cited as *EP*.

short of the responsibility of a mother. Conscious and proud of her beauty, she sets her heart on the satiety of her indiscreet lust, as Dr. Johnson wittily says, though not without giving some offense to the fair sex, "A pretty woman, if she has a mind to be wicked, can find a readier way than another. . ."¹⁹ Under these circumstances, Nada's promiscuity not only deprives her of the status of a mother in Richard's eyes, but contaminates the soul of her son as Clara's does. She flirts with Dean Nash of the Johns Behemoths School in front of her son, cohabits with a Mr. Sheer in New York, and pets with a stranger in the living room. The scandal climaxes in the scene when Richard stands face to face with Mr. Body (the name itself a double entendre) naked in the closet of Nada's room. These episodes do have bad influence on the malleable mind of a child.

Of various articles on Nada's behavior and *modus vivendi*, there are few remarks bearing on how her adultery and promiscuity destroy the mother image and result in the disruption of the family. In an analysis of Nada's double faces, Joanne V. Creighton mentions briefly that Nada is "a successful novelist whose life is schizophrenically divided between desperate conformity to suburban life-style and bohemian rebellion against it."²⁰ What is the consequence of her "bohemian" way of life is left unexplained. Grant has also asserted that Richard must keep secret about Nada's affairs is "the most hideous game [he] is asked to play."²¹ Nada is more an egoist who only caters to her voracious lust than a mother who is responsive to what her son feels and needs:

"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.

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, Tuesday, 5 June 1781, as quoted in James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 1167.

²⁰ Creighton, p. 55.

²¹ Grant, p. 51.

I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it. You're not going to blame me for anything." (*EP*, p. 225)

Nada has run away from home three times, leaving a cold house to the miserable "shabby bachelors"—the father and the son. Disappointed at and infuriated with what Nada has done, Richard commits matricide when he witnesses Nada going to pack. Later on, he confesses, "[A] hard, sharp kernel of fire in my stomach that had to be kept from bursting out into flame" (*EP*, p. 119). With this in mind, we may find it plausible to argue with Ellen G. Friedman as she states:

The story offers a variation of the Freudian romance. Instead of killing his father in order to marry his mother, Richard kills his mother in order to establish an irrevocable relationship between that of killer and victim. In Oates's suburban paradise, human associations are so elusive, so slippery—even those between mother and son—that only murder guarantees their stability.²²

Obviously, she tries to explain away Richard's matricide in terms of the Oedipus complex. That theory may be heuristic in construing the psychological depth of some works which smack of that nature. But it seems not very appropriate to apply to this case. For one thing, there are no signs indicating Richard's abnormal or morbid love toward Nada; he just wants his mother to stay home so that he will not have a chilly and cheerless home after school. There is no conflict between Richard and his father, either. Furthermore, the act of murder destroys and terminates rather than stabilizes the relationship between them. Who can perpetuate his relations with the dead forever? Perhaps Friedman means the permanence of a murderous relationship that prevents any further change. The murderer may pursue this kind of ties with irrational and fierce method. But the victim, of course, will not appreciate the fact.

²² Ellen G. Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 56-57.

Nadine Greene represents another type of the femme fatale—murderess whose prototype is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who strikes a nail into Sisera's temple while he falls asleep in her tent (Judges 4). Strangely enough, the writers of *Judges* do not blame her for that crime. That she disposes of the enemy of God seems to be the only reason to acquit herself of homicide. Brought up in a wealthy, middle-class family, Nadine urges Jules to take her to run away from home with no particular aim: "You'll take me away from here. I'll get in your car and close the door. . . . I'll kill myself if I can't get out of this place."²³ On the way Jules steals to support her, but she deserts him while he is lying sick in a Texas hotel. Several years later, he comes across her in a restaurant. She is the wife of a successful lawyer. Her violent passion drives her to betray her husband. Like a female spider feeding on its sexual partner after mating, she attempts to shoot him after they resume their old love. Afterwards she tries to kill herself but fails. The author does not mention any punishment for her crime. Obviously, there is something wrong with her mind.²⁴ Leaving for California, Jules still proclaims that he will come back to marry her some day if he makes a fortune there—a plot which echoes Jay Gatsby's infatuation with his young love, Daisy.

Why does Nadine behave in such an eccentric and unpredictable way, then? In order to answer this question, it would be wise to analyze the various strata of her personality as the author depicts her. Jules's association with Nadine begins with ill omens heralding a sinister and eerie relation between them. As Alice Conkright Martin has said, there is a "final apocalyptic conclusion of death" hanging over their relations.²⁵ Jules falls in love with Nadine because of his

²³ Oates, *them* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1969), p. 287. Further page reference is to this edition and is hereafter cited in the text.

²⁴ Robert M. Adams, rev. of *them*, by Joyce Carol Oates, *New York Times Book Review*, 28 Sept. 1969, p. 5. He calls Nadine a "murderous psychotic."

²⁵ Alice Conkright Martin, *Toward a High Consciousness: A Study of the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, Diss. Northern Illinois University 1974 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), p. 195.

employer Bernard Geffen, who was found dead in front of a house with his throat slit while he was engaged in an illicit transaction. Intending to get himself acquainted with Nadine, Jules intrudes upon her house by mistakenly delivering a potted plant to her. He regards the mission as "no more worse than death," encountering the corpse of a "smashed squirrel" on the road (*them*, p. 275). Moreover, the plant he sent to Nadine has "sickly white flowers nodding above dark, waxy green leaves" which are for the dead (*them*, p. 277). The author also uses the metaphor of disease to describe their consuming and disastrous passion. For instance, Jules admittedly speaks his mind concerning his infatuation, "For love, being a delirium and a pathological condition, makes of the lover a crazed man; his blood leaps with bacteria that shoot the temperature up toward death" (*them*, p. 274). In a word, the metaphors of death and disease indicate the balefulness and deadliness of their association which would end up in no good result.

Nadine's destructive disposition derives from her unstable mentality. In many passages the author tells us that Nadine is a person of moods. Obsessed with melancholy and loneliness, she usually cries for nothing. She even has the impulse of self-destruction:

If we were on a boat I would break it in two. I'd sink it under us. We'd drown. I can't control my feelings for you and so we would drown. If we were in a car, driving fast, I'd take the wheel away from you and make us crash. (*them*, p. 391)

Although she is passionate on the surface, she is frigid, incapable of love (pp. 288, 296, 369, 392, 394, 396, 398). Her union with Jules rings masochistic. She asked Jules to take her to flee to Mexico, but deserted him while he was sick of diarrhea in Texas. The story repeats itself in her betrayal of her lawyer husband when she comes across Jules several years later.

Nadine's image appears ghost-like and unreal, never materialized. In Jules's mind, she is a Pygmalion rather than a

human: "When he was with Nadine, he feels as if he were lying with someone he had made up, a girl he'd dreamed into being" (*them*, p. 286). Embracing Nadine in his arms, Jules has the illusion of being in a painting, which is a distorted representation of reality. These indicate the emptiness and immateriality of their relationship.²⁶ Unstable in emotion, immature and childish, she is subject to self-destruction or murderous acts. In a psychoanalytical study of Oates's characterization, Joyce Markert Wegs has put it right: "Nadine is a demonic-virgin, and the miracle which she accomplishes is a perverse one, inspiring Jules to sexual miracles which are unsatisfying."²⁷

Loretta and her daughter represent the positive characters in the family trilogy. They are comparable to King David's queen Bathsheba in the sense that they are defiled women who strive to survive the upheaval in their lives and finally turn out to be the incarnation of Earth Mothers (II Samuel II). King David covets Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, so that he sends her husband to the front where the fight is most dangerous. Uriah is thus killed in active service and thereby David makes Bathsheba his queen. In this episode she is passive, having no say in the whole transaction. Her fate changes as she is taken from one man to the other. Her adaptability enables her to survive whatsoever befalls her. Despite her past experience about which she can do nothing, though, Bathsheba becomes the queen of King David; so do Loretta and Maureen achieve the status of Earth Mothers—a symbol signifying fertility, all forgiveness, generosity, and perseverance.

Loretta and Maureen are much alike in their early experiences; indeed, Maureen can be regarded as a mirror image of her mother.²⁸ In their early days, they live under the yoke

²⁶ Kathleen Burk Bloom, *The Grotesque in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates*, Diss. Loyola University of Chicago 1979 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), pp. 74-77. Bloom observes that Nadine is connected with "imagery of the void," p. 75.

²⁷ Joyce Markert Wegs, *The Grotesque in Some American Novels of the Nineteen-Sixties: Ken Kesey, Joyce Carol Oates, Sylvia Plath*, Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 1973 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), p. 186.

²⁸ John L'Heureux, "Mirage-Seekers," *The Atlantic* (Oct. 1969), 128-29; rpt.

of poverty, so much so that they are prematurely forced to face many problems—the violence of male brutality, suffering, prostitution, homelessness, and mental lethargy. They share a common wish—to have a house of their own. Loretta achieves this goal by marrying three men, while Maureen makes a plan to seduce her teacher into marrying her. If the woman/home assumption as stated in the preceding section holds true, they are good women for they stick to the houses. Time and again Loretta dreams “about this house, about her living alone in it, owning it, being able to lock all the doors and windows and owning everything: her own house!” (*them*, p. 51; see also p. 118). Similarly, Maureen expresses her dream in a letter to her English teacher Joyce Carol Oates at the University of Detroit: “[To live] in a house out of the city, a ranch house or colonial house, with a fence around the back” (pp. 335-36; see also p. 441). In these passages the author tries to convince the reader that Loretta and Maureen are entirely different from those female characters whom we have seen before, say, Clara, Nada, and Nadine, who abandon their homes and take to the road. If these so-called wicked women are characterized by restlessness, mobility, and instability. Loretta and Maureen are static by nature.²⁹ But that does not guarantee that they are immune from trouble, ordeal, and catastrophe in life. On the contrary, an overwhelming list of sufferings are in store for them.

The threat of violence always looms up in their mind and turns out to be nightmares in the wake of stupefying shock. Loretta’s dream to lead an ordinary life like thousands of girls is shattered ruthlessly when she wakes up one morning to find her boy friend Bernie Malin lying beside her dead as a door-nail. The murderer is her brother Brock, who shot Bernie in the head. Helpless and dumbfounded, she appeals to the cop, Howard Wendall, who comes to help her dispose of the corpse and rapes her in the very bloody scene. Not yet recovering

in *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, p. 17.

²⁹ See Waller, p. 132.

from the stupefaction of murder, she is ruthlessly thrown into another horror of male brutality. At the terrible moment, what she beholds are "the dishes still piled in the sink" (*them*, p. 49). For her sex is disgusting, dirty, and diabolic.

All in all, male violence destroys Loretta's hope for happiness; it is the very source of her grievances. Brock murders her young love while Howard tramples upon her dignity as a human.³⁰ In order to survive, Loretta has to swallow down intolerable insult, affliction, and physical assault imposed upon her as well. Indeed, as one critic has stated, "Having come through disaster, Loretta, exhibiting the resilience characteristic of the poor in Oates's novels, attempts to reestablish her life in less vulnerable circumstances."³¹

Perseverance shapes Loretta into the image of Earth Mother. She marries Howard without any choice. Living in the countryside, she has to bear family quarrels, the nagging of her mother-in-law, a dull life full of drudgery and malice. During the war, she leaves home to go to Detroit with her three children as her husband joins the army. She once tries to go on the street, but is arrested by the police—a bitter joke with which Howard often teases her later. She has been working in a beauty salon and restaurant as well as doing many other odd jobs. It is apt to call her an "invincible matriarch who survives the ever-increasing turbulence of her life."³²

Emotionally, Loretta is impervious to changes and strong-nerved enough to cope with any cataclysm. Howard is killed in an accident in the factory. There is no description about Loretta's reaction to the tragedy except a sketch of the funeral mass: "Jules had sat beside his mother, immensely weary of her sorrow, which was as confused and lightheaded and uncontrolled as her anger usually was" (*them*, p. 146). After all, she does not particularly feel sad or mournful for the occasion, for it is just like so many incidents in her life. What

³⁰ Stevens, pp. 130-35.

³¹ Anthony Decurtis, "The Process of Fictionalization in Joyce Carol Oates's *them*," *Studies in the Novel*, 7 (Summer 1975), 123.

³² Grant, p. 52.

she is musing on is to begin her life anew. She marries Pat Furlong soon, whom she divorces for beating Maureen into catatonia. When her house was burned down in the 1967 Detroit riot, she was herded to the Fisher YMCA, in which she encounters a man whom she is going to marry toward the end of the novel. The author does not specify the name of the man, yet it does not matter for the bridegroom can be any man, as one critic has driven it home:

[Loretta] is resistant and tenacious after the fashion of clay or dough. Various slovenly husbands and gruggy acquaintances enter her life and depart from it, generally without attracting much attention, generally leaving children behind. . . .³³

Like her mother, Maureen prefers to lead a calm and peaceful life. Moving all the time, squalid living environment, and bad education—all of these make her despair of any hope of better life. She takes to flight by two ways: first, she goes to the library to escape from the noisy, awful life in the slum; secondly, she saves money to enable her to pursue her own dream some day. As a school girl, she usually goes to the library “to let her mind go quiet and blank, give herself a good rest so that she could get her life straightened out” (*them*, p. 131; see also p. 333). Her hope to better herself and improve her social status is denied for the civilized world seems reluctant to accept her. Two episodes spell out her discouragement and despondency. She borrows a book from the library and finds a large tear down one page while she is returning it. The librarian insisted on her paying a fine: “She saw the woman’s eyes coldly over her, Maureen in a sweater of loose knobby wool, worn at the elbows and uneven in back; Maureen looking guilty, with her legs absurdly thin and exposed” (*them*, p. 132). Why is she guilty because of her shabbiness? Nevertheless, she has to pay the fine, otherwise she will be scornfully rejected or despised. Her disappointment in the civilized world recurs when she loses the secre-

³³ Adams, p. 5

tary's notebook of her class whose minutes dated back to 1953. Her fear and anxiety almost drive her mad. But the loss of the notebook symbolizes the unmaking of her hope. It is worth noting here that Maureen regards the book as a tool by which she can make her dream come true. Ellen Friedman has pointed out:

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 reveres it as a major token of her distance from the sordid, noisy squalor of her home, as an icon whose powers are liberating. . . .³⁴

Maureen avails herself of sinking into catatonic stupor and impulsive overeating to escape from male brutality.³⁵ She turns to go on the street to make money with the hope to have her own way some day. Ironically, she keeps her money in a book called *Poets of the New World*. Her stepfather Pat Furlong discovers the money and beats her severely. It is so terrible that she remains catatonic for thirteen months. She stays in her bed all day long, shunning communication with the outside world, though she knows what is going on around her. Moreover, she overeats so as to make herself fat and ugly (*them*, pp. 228-30; 261).

Her determination to have a home and get a man to marry her turns over a new leaf in her life. The target is her teacher, Jim Randolph, in the night-school class at Highland Park Junior College, who is married and has three children. But she does not care about that. She wants him to divorce his wife and leave his children behind. At this juncture, she is pitiless and fierce as she is negotiating about the matter with Jim's wife, a tired, middle-aged housewife. An entirely different Maureen enters the stage as she narrates her story, "So I explained to her that I was going to marry him and that she

³⁴ Friedman, p. 78. See also Decurtis, p. 124.

³⁵ Mary Ann Wilson, *The Image of Self in Selected Works of Joyce Carol Oates*, Diss. The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College 1977 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), pp. 35-37. See also Grant, pp. 53-54.

could go to hell, what if she is educated or not, what if she has three kids that are his and had two miscarriages, I'd have kids for him too and I wasn't going to be talked out of it!" (*them*, p. 441). Rather, she determines to outfight her rival by hook or by crook. The world is full of damage, assault and danger for woman. Oedipus has ample reason to lament the fate of his daughters before his self-exile for there is no one to protect them except themselves and they must be tough and resilient enough to undergo hardship and predicament in life. Loretta tries to survive by accepting what it is as the earth takes and absorbs all that come to her. In comparison, Maureen is more active than her mother. She sets up a goal for herself and grasps every opportunity to accomplish it no matter how others think of her.

There are still some differences between them. To begin with, Loretta is illiterate while Maureen goes to school now and then. For that reason, their reaction to pressure is different: Loretta takes to the movies, imagining herself as the heroine of the film (*them*, pp. 16, 22, 34, 37, 54, 59, 117, 137); Maureen goes to the library to escape from slum life.³⁶ Moreover, she attempts to make use of education as an efficient means to escape her doomed fate, though she fails in this respect. The fact that she accepts the traditional role of her sex—marriage and child raising—indicates the conservative moral viewpoint the author imposes on her positive character. True, Maureen has the chance to stand on her own at one time, but she declines it. This decision makes her different from those foregoing femmes fatales. In the last analysis, Loretta seems more strong-nerved than her daughter; she could survive in any weather, but Maureen collapses on account of stark male brutality.

In the family trilogy Oates successfully depicts the images of women in different social and cultural milieu, though she does not commit herself to feminism. For all that, she shows no less concern and sympathy for the fate of women. Oates

³⁶ Decurtis, p. 125.

herself confesses that she is not a radical feminist.³⁷ As a writer who has in mind the model of the masters of European realism and surrealism, say, Dostoevsky, D. H. Lawrence, Kafka, and Thomas Mann, she is by no means to devote herself to a single cause on the ground that she appeals to human nature in general. Furthermore, instead of writing about "strong, self-determining, fulfilled women," she especially deals with those frustrated, unfulfilled, and unliberated women, an anachronism which infuriates the feminists so much that they even regard her as a "freak."³⁸ As a matter of fact, she is more concerned with what it is than what it should be for her work is a mirror held up to nature. So far as she re-presents the reality of womanfolk in the patriarchal society and provokes the reader to think about the existing problem, her goal has been achieved. Therefore, she has a penetrating insight into the dialectics of woman and her problems as regards to her self identity:

But there is no reality to the class of "women," just as there is no emotional reality to the "species." There are only individuals. . . . The only reality is personality. Not sex. Not sexual identity. No categories can contain or define us, and that is why we draw back from the female chauvinists who claim a biological sisterhood with us, just as we draw back from the male chauvinists who have attempted to define us in the past.³⁹

Oates's refusal to write about a positive, liberated female hero is justified and consistent from her own standpoint as a writer. And through her dramatization of the fate of women in modern time, she calls the reader's attention to ponder on the nature of feminine mystique and problems. She knows

³⁷ Oates, "Stories That Define Me: The Making of a Writer," *New York Times Book Review*, 11 July 1982, p. 16; Oates, "An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," with Leif Sjöberg, *Contemporary Literature*, 23: 3 (1982), 273.

³⁸ Alfred Kazin, "Oates," *Harper's* (August 1971), 80. Kazin says, "I am fascinated by the intense dislike she arouses—perhaps especially among women writers, who would like to put her down as a freak."

³⁹ Oates, "Out of the Machine," rev. of *The Prisoner of Sex*, by Norman Mailer, *The Atlantic* (July 1971), 43.

that creating an ideal female hero as the feminist thinks right, that is, a Noraesque character, is to go from one extreme to the other. In order to avoid the risk of falling into a booby-trap of polarized stereotype or filling her works with Amazons, she finds a way out of the horns of dilemma by creating characters with flaws as we meet in daily life. In her study of the characterization of women in Oates's canon, Lucinda Franks concludes:

She creates people who isolate themselves from the complexity of their worlds, who cast about in states of narcissism and hubris, trying to impose their own single-visioned reality on the chaos of life, or who retreat altogether into cataleptic states of mind denial. Almost always, these characters find redemption and survival by accepting the natural order of the universe, by resigning themselves to the fact that there is no one answer, no deliverance, by rejoining and flowing with the society around them.⁴⁰

To sum up, in the family trilogy Oates depicts women in different social strata—landed middle class, upper middle class suburban matron, and the urban poor—probing deeply into their obsession, prejudice, and predicament. Her purpose is to present her portraiture of the woman folk in modern American society. Since they belong to different social groups, their attributes differentiate in the processes of their life experiences. This article attempts to use the Salome/Jael/Bathsheba triad to analyze the images of women and the significance of their roles in the trilogy. As femmes fatales, Clara and Nada bring forth their own ruin. Nadine is a special case: she commits murder for she is a psychopath who cannot control herself. Thus we can discern a remarkable difference among them: Salome (Clara and Nada) seduces others into committing murder, while Jael (Nadine) does it herself. Loretta and Maureen, poor as they are, survive every kind of

⁴⁰ Lucinda Franks, "The Emergence of Joyce Carol Oates," *New York Times Magazine*, 27 July 1980, p. 26. See also Jay Paritri, "A Taste of Oates," *Horizon*, 26:8 (Nov./Dec., 1983), 50.

hardship and difficulty. It seems that Oates's sympathies are with the less privileged women than with the well-to-do ones.⁴¹ Perhaps, that is her humanitarian concern for her woman folk who still suffer from fear, oppression, poverty, murder, rape, and what not. In this manner, though she does not uphold radical feminism in public, she contributes much to call attention to the reality of woman status in American society.

⁴¹ Mary Allen, *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 133.

歐慈家庭三部曲中的婦女形象

紀元文

摘要

美國當代小說家喬惹絲·凱洛·歐慈於六〇年代末期出版的三部小說（**人間樂園**，一九六七年；**富貴人家**，一九六八年；**他們**，一九六九年）主要是以家庭生活為經，社會變遷當緯，刻劃婦女角色的特質，故以家庭三部曲名之。本文的目的在於運用三種聖經原型人物，來闡明婦女角色的意義：莎樂美（要命的女人），雅億（女兇手），拔士巴（受玷辱的女人後來成為皇后）。

人間樂園的女主角克拉娜與**富貴人家**中的達娜是典型的莎樂美式的人物。二者皆出身窮困，經過奮鬥，終於躋身中產階級。無終止的追求慾望是她們的致命傷：前者一味追求物質主義，後者耽於肉慾與虛名，最後導致家破人亡。**他們**一書中的娜汀是一個神智異常，人格分裂的角色。她要求素昧平生的朱禮帶她逃家，朱禮在德州臥病不起時，她却棄他而去。娜汀婚後邂逅朱禮立即背叛丈夫；激情之後，又企圖槍殺朱禮並自盡。她是三部曲中唯一的女兇手。羅瑞姐及其女兒木蓮是男性暴力的受害者。羅瑞姐的情人被其弟射殺於臥榻之傍；木蓮被其繼父毆打而陷入精神恍惚達十三月之久。強韌的生命力使她們在橫逆的環境中掙扎求存，最後她們還是在婚姻制度下找到歸宿。

綜觀以上分析，歐慈在家庭三部曲中，確實刻劃不同階層的婦女，探究她們的觀念、慾望與困境。莎樂美／雅億／拔示巴這三種原型人物，適足於代表她們在三部曲中的象徵意義。克拉娜與娜達誘使他人犯罪，娜汀是唯一的女兇手，而羅瑞姐與木蓮艱忍圖存，展望新生。歐慈似乎較同情貧苦的婦女，這可能是她的人道關懷；同時反映出作者傾向於認同傳統的婚姻家庭制度。