

Gender and the Grotesque in the Short Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates

Elizabeth MacInnes De Nittis

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Approved by

Advisory Committee

Dr. Meghan Sweeney

Dr. Katherine Montwieler

Dr. Tiffany Gilbert

Chair

Accepted by

Dean, Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of five works of short fiction by author Joyce Carol Oates. One story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,” is one of her best-known and often criticized, while the other four, “Haunted,” “The Premonition,” and “Extenuating Circumstances” are part of a lesser-known collection entitled Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque. The similarity running through all four stories is Oates’ use of the grotesque image in her depiction of violence, and the implications about gender roles found therein.

Oates’ work is famous for its attention to violence perpetrated by men upon women, and the first story includes such. However, in the other three stories, the aggressor is female, and her action seems to represent an inability to achieve or a frustration with the feminine role; her violence is a grotesque inversion of idealized femininity.

The aim of this thesis is to explore Oates’ treatment of gender and violence using elements of the grotesque. While much criticism of Oates suggests that she uses grotesque violence to bemoan the victimization of women, my contention is that her treatment of gender reveals that, regardless of sex, individuals who strive to conform to the prescribed gender roles society presents to them are grotesque and problematic.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, Robert and Janice MacInnes. You both instilled in me the value of education and the rewards of hard work, and celebrated in every way my passion for literature. All of my successes belong to you.

INTRODUCTION

The short fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, a body of work that spans more than four decades, is frequently noted for its attention to the violence and deviancy. The world of this fiction is populated with characters whose rage and obsessions lead them to desperate, and often atrocious, acts. Long criticized for this emphasis on violence, a seemingly inappropriate subject for a female writer to explore, Oates has nonetheless clung to her depiction of what lurks below the surface of human nature. Most frequently in Oates' fiction, male characters are the perpetrators of violence, often sexual violence, upon females. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," perhaps the most frequently anthologized of all Oates' stories, is a classic example of this theme.

However, the violence of this fictional world is not exclusively male. In her 1994 collection Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque, an anthology of short stories that originally appeared largely in crime/horror or women's magazines, a number of the works present female protagonists who are the perpetrators of violence. Several stories that are included in the collection contain more typically Oatsian male aggressors; a few, such as "The White Cat", are homages to earlier grotesque works by male authors, as Marita Nadal points out in her essay "Variations on the Grotesque: From Poe's 'The Black Cat' to Oates's 'The White Cat.'" As the collection's subtitle indicates, Oates concentrates heavily on the grotesque in her creation of her protagonists, and specifically in the cases of the protagonists examined here, women whose bodies, actions, and obsessions render them as such. It is important to note, however, that elements of the grotesque are common in her earlier work as well; the aforementioned "Where Are you Going, Where Have You Been?" is no exception.

What stands out in these more recent stories is the gender of those characters whose grotesque obsessions lead them to unspeakable acts. Thus, it seems important to examine the ways in which Oates' use of the grotesque impacts both her more typical tales of male-perpetrated violence, as in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," and stories in which females are the perpetrators, as in "Haunted," "The Premonition," "The Guilty Party," and "Extenuating Circumstances." In each of these four "tales of the grotesque," the villains are women whose development into the archetypal female role of wife and mother is interrupted, rendered impossible, or otherwise inverted. Casting both predatory males and homicidal females in a grotesque mold, Oates's work comments on the oddity and horrors of both female victimization and the failure of the traditional gender role.

Defined largely as a writer whose fictive world is filled with rape, murder, and other violent acts, Oates attracts a great deal of criticism about her representation of such a perverse world. As the bulk of her work and thus the bulk of its criticism looks at women as victims, Oates' responses to feminism are often at the forefront. Brenda Daly claims that, despite the fact that Oates has never quite conformed to the widely accepted feminist literary standard of elevating the image of womanhood through her fiction, she nonetheless addresses issues of feminism in her stories (11). Similarly, Joanne V. Creighton asserts that "Oates' short stories and novels are populated by a host of unliberated women...inarticulate, imperceptive victims of an inadequate model of female self-hood...[Oates] participates in a feminist discourse by attempting to assess how women are made and unmade by male definitions of womanhood" (57). That said, Creighton seems to limit these female characters to the role of the passive, the acted-upon woman. Conversely, the males would then be categorized into two groups: violent oppressors, and non-violent oppressors. A more complex perspective of this tendency would be

to look at the violence as an entire system, with both perpetrator and victim as participants, and then venture into an exploration of Oates' position in any discourse.

Not surprisingly, Oates has always rejected curiosity about the volume of violent content in her fiction, considering such questions to be inherently sexist (57). The violent content in question, of course, is usually that of male-upon female, and one can imagine that the questions she finds so irritating relate to certain key issues: how a female writer (who must be inherently feminine) is able to depict brutality so graphically and realistically, whether Oates herself has been a victim of such violence, and whether these depictions are intended to make a feminist statement. Creighton argues that the resolution to the last issue would be affirmative, that Oates is a feminist, but such a statement remains to be heard from Oates herself, and no biographical information on the writer suggests her fictive violence is some form of confessional catharsis.

It is difficult, then, to assert that the violence of Oates' writing serves a strictly feminist purpose. A larger, more unwieldy truth about this fictive violence emerges in an overview of her collective work: all characters, male and female, are affected by and part of violence as a part of life, a part of survival. Mary Kathryn Grant notes, "From violence, in Oates' world, there is no escaping. Continuously, her fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence: a sense of personal impotence. At the heart of violence...is the absolute and utter inability to affirm oneself" (32). This quality of inevitability, of frustration and desperation as causation, demands that all characters, regardless of gender, are entangled in this part of human nature. Exacerbated by the restrictions and mandates of traditional gender roles, the struggles of humanity often erupt in violence. These acts permeating Oates' fiction cast a shadow of violence over the whole of her work, and "beneath this ambiance is the persistent and gnawing fear that one will be destroyed and the corresponding necessity of establishing or maintaining a sense of order or

meaning in one's life" (93). This violence, then, is an outcropping of an overreaction reaction to the idea that one's life has no meaning, no "truth." The striving for order in life, the desperation of this striving and the palpable and often remarkable reactions to these internal struggles all combine to lead, here in Oates' fictive world, to the grotesque.

In this discussion of Oates' use of the grotesque in these selected stories, the organization will be as follows. Section One is devoted to the grotesque itself; the parameters of how the grotesque will be defined in this thesis is established here. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," one of Oates' most frequently anthologized and well-known works, is explored in the second section. This story represents the prototypical Oatesian depiction of violence that is sexual in nature and perpetrated on a young woman. Section Three begins with the title story from Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque, and the first story from that collection, a piece in which a young girl is again the victim of sexual violence, but this time by way of a distinctly grotesque female figure. This story is similar on many levels to "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," but differs in the manifestation of the sexual threat. In the fourth section, "The Premonition," a story in which a housewife and mother is suggested to have gruesomely murdered her abusive husband, is examined for the grotesque treatment of the traditional female role within its confines in the domestic space. "Extenuating Circumstances," the subject of Section Five, is a story in epistolary form in which the jilted female voice explains to her former lover why she has felt it necessary to kill their son. This story makes use of the grotesque bodily image, but also loudly suggests what Bakhtin, and Kristeva as well, argue that such a body does: depicts a repellent transgression of boundaries and a connection to the inevitability of death, through childbirth. The conclusion centers on the discussion of the interconnected themes of

gender and grotesque imagery found throughout the four of Oates' stories that are examined in the body of this thesis.

SECTION ONE

The Grotesque: Definitions and Applications

The term “grotesque” is so broadly applied in literature that any one standard definition seems ill-fitting. Instead, an exploration of the contexts in which the term is applied seems to better draw out its characteristics. Oates herself writes in her afterword to Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque, “What is the ‘grotesque’, and what is ‘horror’, in art?...The arts of the grotesque are so various as to resist definition” (1). She goes on to provide a series of examples of the grotesque in order to establish this very point. According to Oates, the word “grotesque” originates from the term for “grotto,” and refers to ancient cave paintings in which human beings are depicted in misshapen, freakish, and sometimes animalistic forms. The idea of this distorted human, either physically or mentally, and the “grotesque” as its representation, has since been applied to literature that features such characters. Oates references Grendel and his monstrous mother in *Beowulf* as an early expression of the grotesque; later, the paintings of Bosch and Dali exhibited the abnormal human form. And, of course, the fiction of Edgar Allen Poe reigns as a standard example: horror stories that incorporate supernatural elements in their depictions of the grotesque-ness of man (1-2). Oates focuses heavily on the relationship between the grotesque and horror, explaining that it is human nature to be both repelled from and fascinated by the dark underside of human nature, the side which does not wholly exist in the bright, everyday landscape of normal social behavior. We would rather be compelled to imagine such “abnormality”; however, much of the Oatesian grotesque seems to take place in a world that is very much recognizable as our own, and this is what makes it so disturbing. Indeed, she says that “we should sense immediately, in the presence of the grotesque, that it is both ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ simultaneously, as states of mind are real enough...though immeasurable” (5). Though

the horror of these stories seems at times extreme or unlikely, the reader is forced to admit to its possibility.

Of course, not all grotesque literature can be classified as horror, but Oates has provided a strong foundation for its purpose: to express the subverted frustrations and fears of humanity. William Van O'Connor explores this idea of the grotesque in his essay "The Grotesque: An American Genre." As his title suggests, O'Connor is interested in the genre as an American phenomena; while American writers can hardly claim sole contribution to the conception of the grotesque, their history and environment are well-suited to its use. Referencing Thomas Mann's assertion that tragedy and comedy meet in the grotesque, and that the grotesque is the "genuine style" of modern American art, O'Connor notes "that the sharp division between tragedy and comedy has broken down; that the sublime sometimes lurks behind weirdly distorted images; and that the literature of the grotesque is in reaction against the sometimes bland surfaces of bourgeois customs and habits" (5). O'Connor argues that the grotesque in American literature is a product of our philosophical hybridity: Americans are children of the Age of Reason and scientific rationality, but are also influenced by Romanticism and its elements of the supernatural. As reason gave rise to intellectualism and industry, the bourgeois social order was born, and the literary reaction against it is the grotesque (5). If enlightened thought demands a sanitized, rational human being who has risen above instinct and emotionality, then the emergence of the grotesque character, one who is foul, bizarre, or desperately monomaniacal, offers a kind of cathartic relief and stands in protest to the restrictions of society. O'Connor notes the abundance of Southern writers who tend toward the grotesque, as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers have done, positing that the South's experiences with upheaval and poverty have, over generations, called into question the existing social order (6).

From places and times of increased chaos or repression, then, does the grotesque originate and flourish. Oates certainly places the action of her stories in such places; the America of the mid-to-late-twentieth century easily presents enough of these elements to encourage such expression.

Perhaps the broadest, yet most probing, explanation of the grotesque comes from the beginning of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. This collection of interconnected short stories about the inhabitants of Winesburg is subtitled "The Book of the Grotesque" and opens with a vignette about an old man who has discovered a great wisdom within a dream. He finds that, when the world began and man took his place within it, there existed pure, beautiful, and abstract truths that defined the order of the universe. When humankind happened upon them, its fate was sealed, because "it was the truths that made the people grotesques...the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced a falsehood" (6-7). Here, and throughout the stories that follow with a succession of desperate, lonely, and obsessed characters, Anderson presents the grotesque as that which represents those who strive for an unattainable "truth." This truth might be self-defined or, just as likely, be provided from an external source. As both Oates and O'Connor suggest, society presents many models of being that might lead, in the failure to attain or maintain that model, to reactions that can render he who strives grotesque. Gender roles can certainly be among these models of truth, and Oates leans heavily upon this idea in the stories of interest here.

A character's grotesque nature often manifests itself not only in his or her personal quests or obsessions, but in the physical body as well. Gender becomes especially important in the exploration of the grotesque body, a subject treated thoroughly in Mikhail Bakhtin's study on Rabelais, Rabelais and His World. Bakhtin deconstructs the use of the physical grotesque,

correcting common over-simplifications on the part of other critics, in a way that is invaluable to an analysis of Oates' use of the same manifestation. It becomes clear that personality traits that are obsessive or extreme in nature are reflected in the grotesque body, but the body itself is capable of representing much more. "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style," Bakhtin states, but he cautions against conclusions like those reached by many critics who view such treatment as simple negation, or simply a method of creating satire (303). These kinds of interpretations render the character repellent, "low," or absurd. Instead, one must recognize in the grotesque image that the "object transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects" (310). Thus, the grotesque body is one that outgrows itself, breaching the boundaries that make it a closed system. While the body as a whole is a key point of discussion, Bakhtin also references images in which body parts, rather than the body as a whole, are made grotesque: Rabelais' hero, Panurge, argues that Paris would be safest from military infiltration if her walls were constructed from human genitalia, particularly those of Parisian women. While Bakhtin notes that a good interpretation of this grotesque image suggests that it is not simply a satire of Parisian promiscuity, but a reflection of the power inherent with the body that has transgressed its limits to affect its surroundings. In this particular case, it is a body part that represents this transgression. Genitalia, particularly of the female, represent a body that reproduces, that literally puts another body into the world through the act of childbirth. Though parts of the lower body, particularly those involved with procreation or excretion, are often considered "low" or negative, here Rabelais has introduced the female genitals as the source of military strength for Paris; metaphorically, fecundity will protect them (313-314). This example

from Rabelais suggests a very specific characteristic at work: “The confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently” (315). The grotesque body acts upon its world, and in that way is inherently open; it calls into awareness the idea of the body not as a clean, independent machine, but a continual invader of the space around it. Bakhtin stresses the importance of recognizing that “the grotesque body...is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). For this reason, the grotesque body occupies no set of boundaries but occupies its entire world. A plethora of universal human bodily functions contribute to the grotesque, according to Bakhtin: “Eating, drinking, defecation, and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing) as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body: all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely interwoven” (317).

The work of Julia Kristeva on abjection speaks to the significance of the bodily grotesque as well. Bodily excretion, according to Kristeva, is connected to the process of death itself, as the body will eventually shed the soul itself to become a corpse, the ultimate form of waste (3). Excretions are repellent because they are what we “permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). They are not an object of disgust for some instinctual sense of hygiene: “It is not...lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). Even if on a purely subconscious level, we are aware that “these bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (3). Particularly in the case of lower bodily excretions then, menstrual bleeding and childbirth amongst them, there is for both Bakhtin and Kristeva the acknowledgement of death.

Essentially, the grotesque body is not individual, but a link on the chain of birth and death, of expiration and renewal. This conception of the body contributes to the image of the human being, in his/her body, as an animal; grotesque images frequently carry with them suggestions of animalism in their exaggerations of human behavior or physical features. Gender, and the issues of reproductive difference that define gender, play a clear role in the formation of the grotesque image. As Judith Butler establishes in her "*Bodies That Matter*," there is a materiality to the human body that cannot be rendered theoretical (31). One's sex is inextricably linked to the body, and thus it seems elementary that a grotesque treatment of gender would incorporate the body on some level. The physical body, the thing which most inescapably marks the sex of its owner, will be a source of grotesque expression in Oates' stories. Because gender and bodies are so interwoven, the grotesque expression and representation of gender within the realm of the body are thus an important part of her characters' construction.

SECTION TWO

“Don’t You Know Who I Am?” : Arnold Friend, Connie, and The Grotesque

One is hard-pressed to conduct any thorough research of the short fiction by Joyce Carol Oates without encountering the breadth of work that discusses one of her most well-known stories, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” The story is so frequently anthologized that Oates herself acknowledges in her introduction to the collection High Lonesome: Stories 1966-2006 that she wishes it might have been excluded in order to make room for a lesser-known work, but realizes that “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” somehow belongs in a collection representative of her body of short fiction. Like most of her stories, this one tends to stick in the memory for its hauntingly surreal suggestions of horrifying violence and characters whose extreme natures separate them from the relatively mundane inhabitants of realism. Also, as in most of her stories, Oates chooses for her subject matter the victimization of a young girl just entering womanhood; the male gaze, one that is particularly predatory, has now claimed her as viable prey. In the case of Connie, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, her extrovertedness and sexual availability attracts not only the more well-intended “older boys” whom she meets at the hamburger joint, but also the sinister Arnold Friend. In her attempt to achieve her vision of ideal womanhood via the attainment of what her imagination defines as romantic love, Connie, like many female protagonists of Oates’ fictive world, instead merely places herself in the role of passive victim at the hands of a much-older man.

Oates’ treatment of this phenomenon (male perpetration of sexual violence against a young female) is certainly unique, but criticism of its significance is often distracted by two elements: one is the surrealism that pervades the story, rendering even the most basic elements of

it ambiguous, and the other is the very concrete inspiration for that treatment. The dream-like quality of Connie's encounter with Arnold Friend begs the question of whether Friend is even real, or simply a cautionary nightmare born of too much daydreaming in the sun. Should this be the case, it opens up a world of possible readings of "Where Are You Going. Where Have You Been," including the possibility that Friend is Satan incarnate, a common interpretation offered by Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski (2).

However, if one chooses to consider the fact that Oates bases her story on the true case of an Arizona serial killer, a change in course might become necessary. Oates affirmed specifically during a reading at Charleston, South Carolina's Dock Street Theatre in May 1999 that the articles, like that of Tom Quirk, are correct in asserting that Arnold Friend is based upon Charles Schmid, dubbed the "Pied Piper of Tucson" by Time magazine. Schmid was convicted of murdering two teenaged girls with the help of an accomplice, and his manner of dressing and speaking to fit in amongst those younger than he are similar to Friend's. Thus, in this light, Friend is real instead of imaginary, and Connie does meet her death, despite the ambiguity of Oates' ending. It is in Oates' depiction of Connie, the young girl in the state of "becoming," of Friend, the hyper-masculinized predator, that she most dramatically employs the grotesque.

Connie, as a barely post-pubescent young woman, has taken to herself a very self-conscious version of femininity. Hyper-aware of appearances and the judgments of others, she "had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right" (249). While such a characteristic may be common among teenaged girls, one must recall Bakhtin's assertion that one in the state of "becoming" is inherently grotesque. Not only has Connie just recently emerged from the state of biologically becoming a woman, but she is working toward the passivity and performance that

she considers to be womanhood. As Joyce M. Wegs states, “to Connie and her mother, real value lies in beauty...Oates suggests that this is precisely the problem” (88). Connie believes that her superiority to her older sister June, and the strained relationship between herself and her mother, stems from her physical attractiveness and the ability she has to present herself in a sexually desirable light. The desired end of Connie’s efforts, she believes, will be the attainment of romantic love through sex. Connie, who has already had some sexual experience with boys close to her own age, daydreams about “how sweet it always was, not like someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs” (253). Up to this point, her conceptions of love and sex, of femininity and attractiveness, are not refuted; it seems to Connie that her idealized version of male/female interaction is a “truth,” since all of her experiences have suggested as much.

Connie’s ability to attract sexual attention, however, has repercussions beyond her intentions. Arnold Friend, the impish teen-impersonator, selects Connie as his new “lover.” Friend is, without a doubt, a grotesque: he is the ultimate vision of a sinister, hyperbolic nightmare, an almost comic response to Connie’s longing for love. Oates’ description of Friend renders him a stereo-typical teenaged anti-hero, one whose characteristics begin to venture into the grotesque: he wears “tight faded jeans stuffed into black, scuffed boots, a belt that pulled in his waist and showed how lean he was, and a white pullover shirt that was a little soiled and showed off the hard small muscles of his arms and shoulders...Even his neck looked muscular.” As for his face, it “was a familiar face...and the nose long and hawklike, sniffing as if she were a treat he was going to gobble up and it was all a joke” (256). Not only does Friend represent the rebellious outsider in his choice of dress, but his very facial features already suggest a predatory

nature. These characteristics, particularly the animalistic, “hawk-like” nose and his implied intentions to literally consume her, are in line with Bakhtin’s definition of the physical grotesque.

Connie’s initial reservations about Friend are eased somewhat by his attention to her; though it seems odd to her that a stranger would appear at her door out of nowhere, “She couldn’t decide if she liked him or if he was just a jerk” (255). It is the combination of his apparent omnipotence, as he knows her parents’ current whereabouts and even what they are doing at that instant, and the shock of realizing that Friend is older than he says, that make Connie begin to fear him. At this point, everything about his appearance that Connie initially saw as ideal suggests that he is in disguise: “He grinned to reassure her and lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. His teeth were big and white...his eyes became slits and she saw how thick the lashes were, thick and black as if painted with a black tarlike material” (259).

All of these factors, the foreboding nature of his gaping mouth and exaggerated “cool teenager” performance as well as his supernatural cognition, lead many critics to the aforementioned conclusion that Friend is Satan, and Friend’s Satan-like qualities are solidly within the realm of the grotesque. Wegs asserts that, like Satan, “he is in disguise; the distortions of his appearance and behavior suggest not only that his identity is faked but also hint at his true self” (89). Friend is, in his disguise, a hyperbolic representation of teenaged masculinity; even his over-confidence and persistence in pursuing Connie intrigue her at first. At the same time, his true intentions toward Connie are a grotesque exaggeration of the male-female dating ritual, because Connie is not to be merely flattered and seduced, but kidnapped and murdered. Friend’s approach to Connie, using the slang and pop-music references that he thinks will reassure her of his belonging, is as much an acknowledgement of how he wishes to appear as it is a strategy for winning her trust. “It is no surprise,” Wegs points out, “that Arnold’s clothes, car,

speech, and taste in music reflect current teenage chic almost exactly, for they constitute part of a careful disguise intended to reflect Arnold's self image as an accomplished youthful lover" (89). Thus, Friend's attempt to embody a masculine ideal is as grotesque as Connie's attempt to appeal to that ideal. However, under these constructed conditions (Friend is not truly a seductive teenager, Connie not as experienced a female as she likes to intimate), the flirtation between the two quickly falls apart. Though Friend's words are those we would imagine Connie wants to hear, "I want you...Seen you that night and thought, that's the one, yes sir. I never needed to look anymore," she becomes terrified, warning, "But my father's coming back. He's coming to get me" (262). Connie has at last secured the attention she has been seeking, but now finds that she had not understood all of its possible implications. Now, she seeks instead the protection of a father figure. The two are soon revealed to be what they are: a predatory psychopath and a frightened young girl.

Though Arnold Friend is easily recognized as a grotesque, crude depiction of an overly-aggressive suitor, Oates does more than simply suggest that "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" is a story about the horror of a young girl's murder. Greg Johnson argues that "While...Connie may be approaching her actual death, in allegorical terms she is dying spiritually, surrendering her autonomous selfhood to male desire and domination" (103). However, Connie fails to exhibit a desire for the autonomy Johnson claims is destroyed by her acquiescence to Friend. Instead, Friend represents a horrifying extreme: Connie's desire for sexual experience, and the attention of men, has been her focus and obsession from the start; Friend's desire to own her and destroy her if he chooses is a parody of the relationship she thinks she wants. In her characterization of the two, Oates reveals that both Connie and Friend are grotesques. While one has aspired to an ideal femininity portrayed to her through popular teenage

culture and placed all expectations for happiness upon it, the other has taken on the persona of the hyper-masculine seducer, taking the rituals of courtship to a sinister extreme. In the meeting of Connie and Arnold Friend, Oates has presented an interaction that is itself grotesque. While we recognize the archetypal behavior of the young vixen and the older male, we are forced to realize that, in this case, the performance is horribly magnified, that the “truth” of identity and role-play that the two have taken to themselves has indeed “become a falsehood” (Anderson, 7). Oates has, in the creation of Connie and Friend as grotesque figures, made a broad statement about the restrictive and sometimes damaging aspects of prescribed gender performance.

SECTION THREE

Ghosts, Real and Imagined, in "Haunted"

The young protagonist of "Haunted," the title story of Oates' collection, also features young protagonists in the process of becoming. Melissa, as well as her friend Mary Lou, is entering sexual maturity. Like Connie, the two girls have found themselves in the dangerous position of having become the prey of the ill-intentioned, but "Haunted" marks a stark departure from the rather predictable fate of Connie. Though the girls themselves and their families and community expect that the threat of violence upon them would necessarily be at the hands of a male, Oates instead creates through a first-person narrator a strange and less predictable suggestion: that the girls' true predator is female.

While Connie and her friends sneak out to the hamburger joint where they can be seen by young men in "Where Are You Going, Where have You Been?," Melissa and Mary Lou instead frequent the abandoned, and allegedly haunted, farmhouses near their homes on the outskirts of town. Just as Connie's parents would forbid her to go such places if they had gotten an answer to the questions in the story's title, Melissa's mother recognizes the danger to two young girls wandering alone, and warns her that the girls "could injure ourselves tramping around where we weren't wanted...and you never knew who you might meet up with in an old house or barn that's supposed to be empty" (4). Melissa, still on the cusp between childhood and adolescence, is more worried about ghosts and puzzled by this warning: "'You mean a bum?'... 'It could be a bum, or it could be someone you know,' Mother told me evasively. 'A man, or a boy...' Her voice trailed off in embarrassment and I knew enough not to ask another question" (4). This admonition comes at a time when Melissa and Mary Lou are already becoming aware of their sexuality and the ways in which they attract, or do not attract, men. Melissa is aware of the fact

that Mary Lou is more attractive than she is, and feels an impending dread of what that might mean: “She didn’t like her face because it was round...staring at herself in the mirror though she knew damned well she was pretty...didn’t older boys whistle at her, didn’t the bus driver flirt with her?...calling her ‘Blondie’ while he never called me anything at all” (10). Though the attention Mary Lou receives is largely inappropriate, and of the sort that Melissa’s mother warns her against, it appears to Melissa that Mary Lou, in “becoming” an object of male desire, obtains a sort of power that she herself will not, and the tension between the two is palpable.

When Mary Lou inevitably captures the attention of one particular boyfriend, Melissa is made even more aware of her friend’s new power. Though he is described as being “slow” by most others in town, Mary Lou has decided to enjoy his attention, seeing the attention of any male as a sign of her arrival at maturity, a way to be more like the wealthier girls in town among whom neither Mary Lou nor Melissa truly belong. The boyfriend is described as “an older boy who’d dropped out of school and worked as a farmhand...His name was Hans; he had crisp blonde hair like the bristles of a brush, a course blemished face, derisive eyes. Mary Lou was crazy for him she said, aping the older girls in town who said they were “crazy for” certain boys or young men” (12). Melissa, conversely, is favored by parents and teachers, encouraged by her mother not to associate with “white trash” like Mary Lou, and held to stricter standards by Mrs. Harding, their schoolteacher. “Tell the old witch to go to hell (Melissa would) say, she’ll respect you then, but of course no one would ever say such a thing to Mrs. Harding. Not even Mary Lou” (5). When Mrs. Harding, who makes Melissa miserable, dies unexpectedly of natural causes, Mary Lou suggests what Melissa fears: “That was because of us, wasn’t it!...what happened to that old bag Harding. But we won’t tell anybody” (5). The two believe at this point that their new power is more than sexual; not only can they attract men and boys, but they also

hold a supernatural sway over life and death for the old and unattractive female, the “witch.” Like Connie, the girls have constructed a truth about womanhood and sexuality in a way that renders them grotesque as well, both in their bodies, which by becoming mature usher in the cycles of menstruation and childbirth, and their obsession to conform to an imagined ideal.

After Melissa’s father discovers her relationship with Hans and threatens the boy to keep him away, the two girls prefer to picnic or simply wander about the grounds of the Minton house, which was “three miles from where we lived. For no reason anybody ever discovered Mr. Minton had beaten his wife to death and afterward killed himself with a .12-gauge shotgun. He hadn’t even been drinking, people said. And his farm hadn’t been doing at all badly, considering how others were doing” (13). The Minton farm is the site of unexplained female victimization; this house, long abandoned and vandalized, is magnetic to the two. Although they are repelled of course by the terror implied in what has happened there, they feel an irresistible compulsion to keep coming closer. While venturing into the house where once the townspeople had “found (Mr. Minton) in the bedroom upstairs, most of his head blown off” and his wife “in the cistern in the cellar where he’d tried to hide her,” Mary Lou is as frightened as Melissa: “her fingers felt cold; but I could see tiny beads of sweat on her forehead” (14). Like their attraction to the attention of older men, the girls cannot stay away from the house despite their fear, and the visits themselves present images that remind them of their usual obsession, as “through the window we saw a garter snake sunning itself on a rusted water tank, stretched out to a length of two feet” (14). While the sight of a snake, another frightening element of a “haunted” and forbidden place, would be expected to send the two running, they are instead transfixed by the grotesque phallic image, a body part representing something larger than itself: “it was a lovely coppery color, the scales gleaming like perspiration on a man’s arm; it seemed to be asleep. Neither one of us

screamed, or wanted to throw something...we just stood there watching it for the longest time” (14). The threat of male sexuality, and male violence, is thus steadily foreshadowed; this is the site of a horrific act of male violence, and a place where young men come to commit rebellious acts, and even the girls expect and fear encountering such during these explorations, but what is finally encountered is shockingly unexpected.

When Melissa, emboldened despite the fact that she is convinced someone has been watching them from inside the Minton place, decides to go back alone, she seems almost to be expecting someone: “At the foot of the stairs I called up, ‘Who’s here?’ in a voice meant to show it was all play, I knew I was alone” (16). Upstairs, nearly overcome by heat and kneeling on a mattress “stained with something like rust and I didn’t want to look at it but I had to,” grotesque images of bodily excretion continue to appear: “Rivulets of sweat ran down my face and sides, under my arms, but I didn’t mind” (18). Melissa knows she is being watched, but when she turns around, it is not a male she sees behind her, but a woman whose body is at once androgynous and grotesquely female: “She wore men’s clothes and was tall as any man, with wide shoulders, and long legs, and big sagging breast like cow’s udders loose inside her shirt...Her eyes were small, and set back deep in their sockets; the flesh around them looked bruised...her thighs were enormous, big as my body. There was a ring of soft loose flesh at the waistband of her trousers” (18). Though Melissa came to the house with the feeling of being watched, she is horrified at how the woman, reminiscent of Friend, “was smiling at me, uncovering her teeth. She could read my thoughts before I could think them. The skin of her face was in layers like an onion, like she’d been sunburnt, or had a skin disease...Her look was wet and gloating” (18). Upon learning that the woman has indeed been watching the girls, Melissa is ordered by her to take her “punishment” for “trespassing,” a sexually sadistic beating that causes Melissa to “pee even

before the first swipe of the willow switch hit me on the buttocks, peeing in helpless spasms, and sobbing, and afterward the woman scolded me saying wasn't it a poor little baby wetting itself like that" (21). In this swift reversal of power, a grotesque version of a female figure similar to Mrs. Harding, whom Melissa and Mary Lou felt they had control over, has once again regained authority over the cowering Melissa, who is without the protection of her friend. On two levels, Melissa's gender has failed her: her relative youth and attractiveness have not protected her from female authority, and that same attractiveness has drawn not the male sexual attention that she fears yet seeks, but the grotesquely inverted attention of a female.

Sharing the details of what has happened with no one, Melissa "told Mary Lou about the Minton house and something that had happened to me there that was a secret and she didn't believe me at first saying with a jeer, 'Was is a ghost? Was it Hans?' I said I couldn't tell" (22). Mary Lou instinctively assumes that any "secret" things that went on there must involve a male, and jealousy leads her to suspect the male is Hans. And, despite the horror of what did happen to Melissa, she explains to the pleading Mary Lou that she can't tell her about it because "'I told you it was a secret' ...I turned away from Mary Lou, trembling. My mouth kept twisting in a strange, hurting smile" (22). Letting her friend assume that what happened was the (at least somewhat) desired outcome of attracting male attention, Melissa prompts Mary Lou to return the house alone herself, inadvertently fulfilling her promise to the grotesque woman to send "her pretty little sister to her tomorrow" (21).

When Mary Lou is found murdered, her own suspicions about the "dangers" of the Minton house are reflected in the reaction of the community: "Hans said over and over he was innocent...Son of a bitch ought to be hanged my father said...everybody knew really it was Hans and Hans got out quick as he could, just disappeared and not even his family knew where unless

they were lying which probably they were though they claimed they were not” (24). To blame Hans for Mary Lou’s murder is to apply some sort of accepted logic to what has happened; it is inconceivable to suspect a woman of the crime, for it was not a crime that a woman would commit within the confines of her gender role. To label Hans a killer is to paint his masculinity in a grotesque light, a grotesque treatment of gender that Oates applies not only to the hideous villain of this story but the rest of the characters as well. The expectations of gender and its performance are also a truth that is false.

The stories of Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque that make up the focus of this thesis have indeed attracted little criticism; the theories behind why this might be are numerous. It is important, then, to take note of what has been written about these works, and that is found in a review of the collection written by Michael Lee. While Lee focuses most of his attention on the more “traditional” Oates stories of the collection, he comments on them all. Of “Haunted,” Lee writes that the tale is about a moment of crisis in a woman’s life, as Melissa is recalling in her middle age the summer Mary Lou was murdered, an incident he calls “an incident from her adolescence, the never-solved murder of her best friend,” which “the narrator has always felt involved supernatural presences and motives that no criminal justice system could ever establish” (3). Lee goes on to define the story as one about “the adolescent girl’s initiation into the mysteries of sex” that “becomes an apt metaphor for larger notions of guilt without redemption, transgression without expiation” (3). This reading presents a certain level of ambiguity. Would no criminal justice system ever establish the old woman as the killer because it is unthinkable to them, as this thesis suggests, or does Lee consider the events of the story to be, in actuality, inconceivable? Also, while it is plain that Melissa feels guilt over the jealousy that caused her to hide the truth of what happened at the Minton house, leading indirectly to

Mary Lou's murder, is that the guilt to which Lee refers, the transgression for which there has been no retribution? Lee's interpretation of the events in this story is cryptic, and his voice stands alone amongst Oates' critics in its mention of "Haunted." It seems likely, however, that Mary Lou's guilt is mostly related to her realization of how horribly the false beliefs about gender the community fosters have affected lives.

SECTION FOUR

The Grotesque in the Domestic Space: "The Premonition"

Up to this point, the stories discussed have centered on female protagonists who are the victims of violence, the acted-upon. This is, of course, a theme that runs throughout much of Oates' short fiction. What we have also seen is gender made grotesque, in ways that are manifested both in behavior, as O'Connor and Anderson tend to define the grotesque, and the physical body, in the way Bakhtin primarily views it. Both genders receive such treatment; the masculine is exaggerated as well as the feminine. In "The Premonition," the topic of this chapter, the violence is done by a female as it is in "Haunted," but in this case it occurs within the system of gender in which both the husband and wife of a traditional nuclear family are grotesque, both in behavior and body, and the male narrator of the story is the lone non-grotesque.

The "premonition" that presents itself in this tale is the feeling, a murky sense of foreboding, that the narrator, Whitney Paxton, cannot shake. This feeling is related to the fact that his alcoholic bully of a brother has, according to their sisters, been again abusing his wife and daughters. Intimidated by his domineering brother but the only male of the family willing to become involved on a night not long before Christmas, Whitney arrives at the house and finds to his initial relief that the females are fine, but realizes somewhat subconsciously that Quinn, the abusive husband, is not away on business as his wife has insisted, but murdered. Choosing to accept the story and leave bearing his own carefully wrapped Christmas gift, Whitney turns his back on the grotesque scene he has just encountered, forced to admit in retrospect that the truth was quite obvious to him all along.

Whitney, unlike his brother Quinn, does not fit the prescribed mold of model manhood that the Paxton family, and it could be said that society in general, demands. Quinn is “a big man, in his late thirties, trained at Wharton School, with an amateur expert’s knowledge of corporate law, socially gregarious, good-natured, yet...very much a physical person.” Quinn is also one who likes to use his hands to get points across, and as Whitney can attest, “sometimes those hands hurt” (173). In contrast, the younger brother has not aggressively pursued a career or begun a family, and these choices have estranged him from the rest of the Paxtons, as his parents are continually disappointed in his “failing to grow into the kind of son Quinn had grown into” (174). However, it is immediately obvious that Quinn is, in spite of appearing to fulfill an admirably masculine persona as a successful family man, a grotesque caricature of a suburban husband and father. Always drunk to some degree, Quinn over-exerts himself as a forceful, hyper-masculine figure. Greeting Whitney at a family Fourth of July barbeque, he directs his brother to socialize with the women and children by waving his carving knife, and Whitney distinctly remembers him “in his comical apron tied around his spreading waist, the wicked-looking carving knife extended toward Whitney in a playful gesture: a mock handshake” (175). Quinn is drunk and his physical girth overreaches its bounds, fulfilling both the over-consumption and “growing” aspects of the physical grotesque, but additionally his threats of physical aggression suggest a striving toward a masculine ideal, one that mandates dominance and even violence; this striving renders his performance of that exaggerated masculinity grotesque as well. It is this difference that makes Whitney an ideal narrator, because his perspective as a voluntary outsider to the grotesque performance of gender allows the reader to view the scene sharing his objective observations.

Ellen, Quinn's wife and the female protagonist, is also a performer of gender. During her marriage to her husband, Whitney relates that Ellen "was unfailingly glamorous...a quiet, reserved, beautiful woman who took obsessive care with grooming and clothes, and whose very speech patterns seemed premeditated," the way her husband prefers her (178). However, on the night Whitney comes to her rescue and finds Quinn mysteriously gone, the surface of her performance is lacking: "Ellen was wearing stained slacks, a smock, an apron; her fair brown hair was brushed back indifferently...she wore no make-up, not even lipstick" (178). This carelessness, and the disregard for Quinn that it suggests, surprises and concerns Whitney, who suspects that something must have gone wrong. Indeed, now Ellen's "eyes were wide and moist and the pupils appeared dilated; there was a look of fatigue in her face, yet something feverish, virtually festive, as well...Whitney wondered if she'd been drinking" (177). Instead of the extreme conformity to the appearance and passivity of femininity that Ellen adopts for public occasions, she is now a domestic drudge, one who suggests drunkenness, and the exaggeration of her eyes and her manic affect introduce elements of the physical grotesque.

This slightly hysterical behavior continues as Whitney enters the house and encounters his nieces. All three females, daughters and mother, are engaged in a hyperkinetic vision of domestic work: the house is harshly, blindingly lit, and has been mostly scrubbed clean. The two young daughters are also androgynously dressed and in the act of cleaning; one of the girls had "been squatting, wiping something up off the floor with a sponge. She wore oversized yellow rubber gloves which made a sticky, sucking sound as she clapped her hands" (181). To Whitney, there seems to be "a distinctly female atmosphere in the room, Whitney thought; with an undercurrent of hysteria...all the overhead lights were on, glaring. Surfaces gleamed, as if newly scrubbed...yet the kitchen still smelled...of something rich, damp, sour-sweet, cloying" (181).

On one level, scrupulous housekeeping is a performance of the expected gender role, and the overzealousness of its execution is behaviorally grotesque. Charlotte Perkins Gilman notably wrote of domestic duty that women's assumption of household work did not suit their natural tendencies, and that indeed the relegation of a person of either gender to the work of the home created for him or her an oppressive atmosphere that threatened mental illness (Donovan 48). Ellen, far from the happy housewife, nonetheless appears at first to simply be adhering to her role, helped by her two daughters, wives-in-training. At the same time, she is maniacal, overwrought, and disturbed in the wake of committing murder. Domesticity as a facet of the feminine role is clearly important here, especially considering the circumstances of this story, in which the housecleaning is more than female duty: it is the concealment of a gruesome murder scene.

Whitney is most discomforted during his visits to his brother's home not by the atypical appearance and dress of his sister-in-law and nieces, nor their nervous behavior, nor the odd hour of a cleaning frenzy, nor even Ellen's drinking; it is the smell of blood that truly repels and frightens him. The "rich, damp, sour-sweet, cloying" odor that cannot be scrubbed away is, clearly to the reader and also to Whitney's subconscious, the result of Quinn's dismemberment (though the sight of his brother's infamous electric carving knife on the kitchen counter does little to arouse his suspicions at this point). However, Whitney quickly withdraws when one of his nieces remarks of the other: "'Don't mind Trish, she's getting her period'... Whitney, embarrassed, pretended not to hear. Was little Trish really of an age when she might menstruate? Was it possible? He raised his coffee cup to his lips with just perceptively shaking fingers, and sipped" (183). The thought of menstruation, particularly associated with "little Trish," strikes in Whitney nothing short of fear. Blood, especially as a form of excretion in the

process of bleeding, is a strong representation of the physical grotesque. As associated with menstruation, it is even more emphatically so. As Bakhtin discusses in his study of Rabelais, excretion is strongly grotesque when it deals with the lower body, strongest when associated with the reproductive process due to the association with the cycle of birth and death. In a house of females, including one he assumed still a child, Whitney considers the possibility of menstruation, and decides that it is the source of his misgivings. In this way, his reaction serves to distract him from the horrifying truth his “premonition” might otherwise suggest. Having decided to leave the house, his fears unfounded, he one last time wonders if something bad has happened, but once again returns to the horror of the female body: “With a thrill of repugnance, he wondered, now, if the blood-heavy odor had to do after all with menstruation...He didn’t want to know, really. Some secrets are best kept by females, among females” (185). With these thoughts, Whitney effectively prevents himself from considering a sinister reason for the premonition of violence he has felt. He is, as a character, certainly not conforming to the hyper-masculine model of his brother, but he is nonetheless male, and his “repugnance” at menstruation, coupled with his desire to believe in the gentleness, even childishness, of women, helps him ignore the possibility of his brother’s murder. Having promised not to open his “gift” until Christmas, Whitney leaves the house, feeling a paternalistic affection for his family-in-law. “How characteristic of women, how sweet,” he thinks, “that they trust us as they do...and that, at times at least, their trust is not misplaced” (189).

As for Michael Lee’s review of this story, “The Premonition,” as well as “The Guilty Party,” the subject of the next chapter, is counted as one of the collection’s tales that “relies too heavily on plot gimmicks and failed surprise endings to jolt the reader into new awareness about what drives people to kill within domestic settings” (5). It seems, contrary to this argument, that

Oates is less concerned with why these murders occur than with how they are carried out, and how they are interpreted. Ellen might fit the description of an abused wife made to fear for her own life once too many times, and it is even possible to cite Gilman's remarks about domesticity and mental illness in this case as well. What is important instead, and remains unaddressed in Lee's commentary, is how gender roles impact and direct the characters' cognition and actions. Though Whitney's faith in traditional gender roles is maintained through this visit, Oates has used this story to communicate a point on this subject. Though Quinn, the grotesque male, is clearly an aggressor, and Ellen (as well as her daughters) clearly a victim, yet the female is the one who has killed. Both are grotesque in their performance of gender, and their fixation on attaining what they believe to be their gender's ideal; like Connie, they are striving for a "truth" in Sherwood Anderson's sense of the word. Quinn's performance of his role has included the abuse that leads to his murder, so his performance has rendered him grotesque and failed him. Ellen, cracking under the strain of enduring her husband and maintaining a feminine façade, has committed the abjectly grotesque offense of dismemberment (the loss of limbs being common in Rabelais' world). Ellen's failure to adhere to the exaggerated passivity of grotesque womanhood has led her to murder, the most un-feminine of acts. It is only through her brother-in-law's fear of menstruation, of the mysterious secrets of womanhood, that she is able to maintain her feminine image. Oates is not simply turning the tables on her expected depiction of violence in this story; though the final violence is perpetrated by a female, we see that it is an outcropping of the grotesque adherence to gender by both male and female that undoes them both. What is unique here is that a woman has turned her own domestic space, the place deemed a prison by Gilman, into the site of her atypical, and thus remarkable, act.

SECTION FIVE

Erasing the Grotesque Female Body: Infanticide in “Extenuating Circumstances”

While “The Premonition” exhibits a violent female protagonist who buckles under the strain of an abusive marriage, Oates does not always portray women in only conditions of domestication or dependence on men. In the case of Ellen, the reader is given little indication of her identity outside of wife- and motherhood, but the last two stories examined here feature female characters who have entered the traditionally male world of advanced education and careers outside the home. Despite having the ability and opportunity to, at least in part, move out of the traditional female role, they are forced unexpectedly back into that role, and the repercussions are detrimental to their very sanity.

The nameless voice behind the epistolary “Extenuating Circumstances” is much more than a mentally ill woman who has murdered her son. She is, or at least was, a woman on the path toward a career and self-sufficiency. She recalls, and wants her former lover to recall, the corduroy bedspread they shared in their college apartment, the place where they would retreat to after “meeting at the Hardee’s corner you from the geology lab or the library and me from Accounting....I was so happy your arm around my waist” (148). They are both students, and in this way equals. It could even be said that the female voice has chosen the more career-oriented area of study; while he studies a science, she is focused on a business-oriented subject, one that might, in all practicality, render her a stronger or more immediate job candidate. Though such a relationship seems ideal, a situation in which the expected future roles of husband and wife have yet to affect them, Joanne V. Creighton offers an observation of Oates’ female characters that already casts a shadow on this relationship. According to Creighton, women in Oates’ fiction, if they have careers (or the promise of one), are seen as threats to male identity; they are

metaphorical “castrators” (156). However, most women in her fictive world are “not desexed by their aggressive intrusion into the male world but devitalized by their acquiescence to female vacuousness” (156). In other words, when confronted with the conflict of being an acceptable female versus pursuing a career or other male-oriented concept of success, Oates’ women tend to retreat into the more accepted, albeit passive and restrictive, role.

In the case of the narrator of “Extenuating Circumstances,” this choice is already made for her. The birth of her unplanned son by the aforementioned lover has apparently halted her education; now, the reasons for doing what she has done include “Because my job applications are laughed at for misspellings and torn to pieces as soon as I leave...Because they will not believe me when listing my skills” (148). Even if such slights are imagined, the narrator views herself as unemployable in the wake of her transformation into a maternal figure. Similar to the predicament of Ellen, who Gilman would claim is at least in part driven to violent behavior by the unhealthy confines of the domestic life, this narrator’s own set of personal goals appears to have been disrupted. In its place, one can gather from the direction of her narrative, an idea of a new type of life materialized; if love between herself and her son’s father had made her happy, perhaps as a family they can be even more so. However, it becomes clear that her lover “did not want him to be born,” and from that rejection, and the rejection of her overly-optimistic vision of that new life, she is unable to recover. And, contrary to Gilman’s assertion that women are not naturally domestic, the works of some cultural feminist scholars have communicated that women are indeed maternal and domestic by nature; indeed, the epistemology of women is the basis for “an ethic that is non-imperialistic, that is life-affirming, and that reverences the concrete details of life” (Donovan 185). This ethic, then, suggests that women are naturally anti-tyrannical and tend to protect the realities of life, i.e. the sustaining of children and families. This concept is of

interest in this story, in which the narrator is able to rationalize the decision to murder her own child. However, there remains the counter-argument articulated by Toril Moi, that there are no true “natural” characteristics that accompany gender. According to Moi, the assignment of “natural” tendencies or strengths is a tool of patriarchy, since “a woman who refuses to conform can be labeled both *unfeminine* and *unnatural*” (1548). In light of these ideas, it is interesting that the protagonist commits infanticide, since such an act opposes the concept of women as naturally nurturing and protective. Perhaps Oates suggests that society’s intensified horror at this particular type of crime speaks to this patriarchal assumption, and that the horror of “Extenuating Circumstances” does as well.

“Extenuating Circumstances,” as the stories discussed have increasingly exhibited, relies on the physical body to communicate the grotesque-ness of our narrator, her situation, and her deed. One of the most damaging elements of her current appearance, the narrator believes, is the fact that her nerves cast an unfavorable light on her in public, especially in front of her former lover in the courtroom: “Because...that flickering light...making my eyes ache so I wore my dark glasses...and I was sniffing, wiping my nose, every question they asked me I’d hear myself giggle so nervous and ashamed even stammering over my age and my name so you looked with scorn at me, all of you” (150). During this proceeding, presumably of the paternity suite, the narrator’s body betrays her. She cannot tolerate the light nor questioning, and she helplessly presents herself in a grotesque manner. Fitting a Rabelaisian model of the grotesque, she excretes both physical matter, in the blowing of her nose, and sound, as both excessive giggling and stammering are exhibited in his work as exaggeration and a transgression of bounds (Bakhtin 317). Beyond that, her nervousness in and of itself can be related to the behavioral grotesque; her obsession with appearing “normal” and thereby re-attracting her lost love backfires. This is

not only because the striving toward being what he might want her to be necessarily renders her behaviorally grotesque, but because her body itself has caused the rupture in her relationship with her son's father.

Childbirth is, according to the observations of Bakhtin, the very essence of the physical grotesque. And childbirth has, for this narrator, irrevocably altered her place in the world. Not only has motherhood apparently ended her college career and relegated her to a less desirable life, but "since he was born my body is misshapen, the pain is always there" (148). Again, whether real or imagined, the changes to the physical body as a result of childbirth are permanent and burdensome. In personal distress over her own body, the narrator bemoans that she killed their son partly because she "had gained seven pounds from last Sunday to this, the waist of my slacks is so tight. Because I hate the fat of my body. Because looking at me naked now you would show disgust. Because I *was* beautiful for you, why wasn't that enough?" (151). The swelling of the body is a literal transgression of its own boundaries, reminiscent of the swelling of pregnancy. The narrator recognizes that this grotesque bodily transgression, as a part of the entire act of childbirth, has driven her lover away. Additionally, another reason is that "I have begun to bleed for six days quite heavily, and will spot for another three or four. Because soaking the blood in wads of toilet paper sitting on the toilet my hands shaking I think of you who never bleed" (151). Here the bleeding is not unexpected, as the idea of it is for Whitney in "The Premonition," but alarming in its excessiveness. The copious bleeding is also associated with childbirth, and its presence essentially tethers the narrator to her home, and more specifically, to her toilet. Abandoned by one who will never experience what she has, she is a prisoner in the very body that has repelled her lost love.

Michael Lee credits this story with the acknowledgement that it is “charged with enough suspense to effectively render extreme mental states” (5). Suspense is certainly a significant element in “Extenuating Circumstances,” for the reader is compelled to discover whether or not the narrator truly goes through with the murder, and she apparently does. However, if Lee, by “extreme mental state” suggests a psychotic break or episode of severe postpartum depression on the part of the narrator, then he has failed to fully consider the tone Oates conveys in the voice of the narrator. Paranoia may be present in her mental state, and certainly depression is as well, but the entire purpose of her missive is to offer the “extenuating circumstances” under which she was forced to end her child’s life. When she considers her son, she “did not want him to be *Mommy*, I wanted him to be *Daddy* in his strength” but by living alone with her she believes he becomes her, even though “in certain things he was his father, that knowledge in eyes that went beyond me in mockery of me” (149). The narrator sees the importance of socializing her son to the appropriate male gender role, and feels that she cannot do so alone, but she also despises the masculinity she believes that he exhibits already. She transfers her anger onto her son, which helps mitigate the sorrow she feels because her misery over the fact that “I see that it was not his fault but even in that I could not spare him” (148). She cannot spare her son, because on some level of her consciousness, his destruction will erase her transformation; she will undo what his birth has done in rendering her grotesque.

CONCLUSION

Gender and the Grotesque

The examination of these five stories has provided examples of how Joyce Carol Oates presents the grotesque, both physical and behavioral, in selected pieces of her short fiction. Even if only considering works in which females are victims of male aggression, as in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,” as many critics do, it is important to recognize the use of the grotesque in the creation of male and female characters. “Haunted,” “The Premonition,” and “Extenuating Circumstances,” by contrast, are stories driven by the violent acts of women who would otherwise appear to fit the socially normative definition of what a female should be. Oates provides us with female protagonists, and victims, that are often less than sympathetic. This dynamic should point to a conclusion that supersedes the idea that Oates depicts such violence as a manner of objecting to the misogynistic elements of society. What is truly at work, in stories such as this one, is that Oates renders the performance of socially normative gender roles, and the socially normative interactions between genders, to be grotesque, or a part of the world we prefer not to see, to relegate to the darker, surrealistic realm of human behavior.

In the stories in which Oates provides us with female perpetrators of violence, whether against male mates or their own male children, the acts we find so horrifying are, according to this principal of the grotesque, simply outcroppings of inappropriate or impossible expectations for one’s life. The striving to conform to an idea of gender renders one grotesque, as does the failure to achieve such conformity. The exaggeration of this striving through the grotesque is Oates’ statement about gender. Neither male nor female exists as the good or bad, light or dark, normative or “other.” Instead, both trigger horrifying acts when the gender role fails. It is

unachievable, interrupted, or carried to an extreme in these stories, and this is what should be so frightening, so grotesque about these tales.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth M. De Nittis was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina. She was educated there at Porter-Gaud School and went on to receive her B.A. in English in 2003 from the University of Georgia. The next year, she was conferred an M.A.T. in Secondary English Education at The Citadel; since 2004 she has taught English composition and literature at the high school and college levels. After earning her M.A. in English from The University of North Carolina at Wilmington in May 2008, she will return with her husband to Athens, Georgia, where she will continue to enjoy writing and teaching