

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Serial Escapers: The Fate of the

Women Characters

in Joyce Carol Oates's

A Bloodsmoor Romance

A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in English at Massey University.

by **Mary-Helen Ward**

1995

Abstract:

In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Joyce Carol Oates uses a parody of nineteenth-century attitudes to women to expose the misogyny inherent in contemporary American family life and romantic love. The women characters in this novel all escape, with varying success, from the restricted roles allowed to them by their society, and acted out in the Kiddemaster/Zinn family. It is through these escapes that this study approaches Oates's exposure of misogyny.

Beginning with an overview of the ways that the women characters are objectified both as members of the family and as the objects of romantic love, and how this distorts and limits them, the discussion moves on to discuss the methods by which the characters perceive their condition. The avenues of escape that they attempt, often trying more than one method, are described, and the relative success of each escape is assessed. The metaphor of a secret passage that each woman character must discover, enter, negotiate and leave underlies this work.

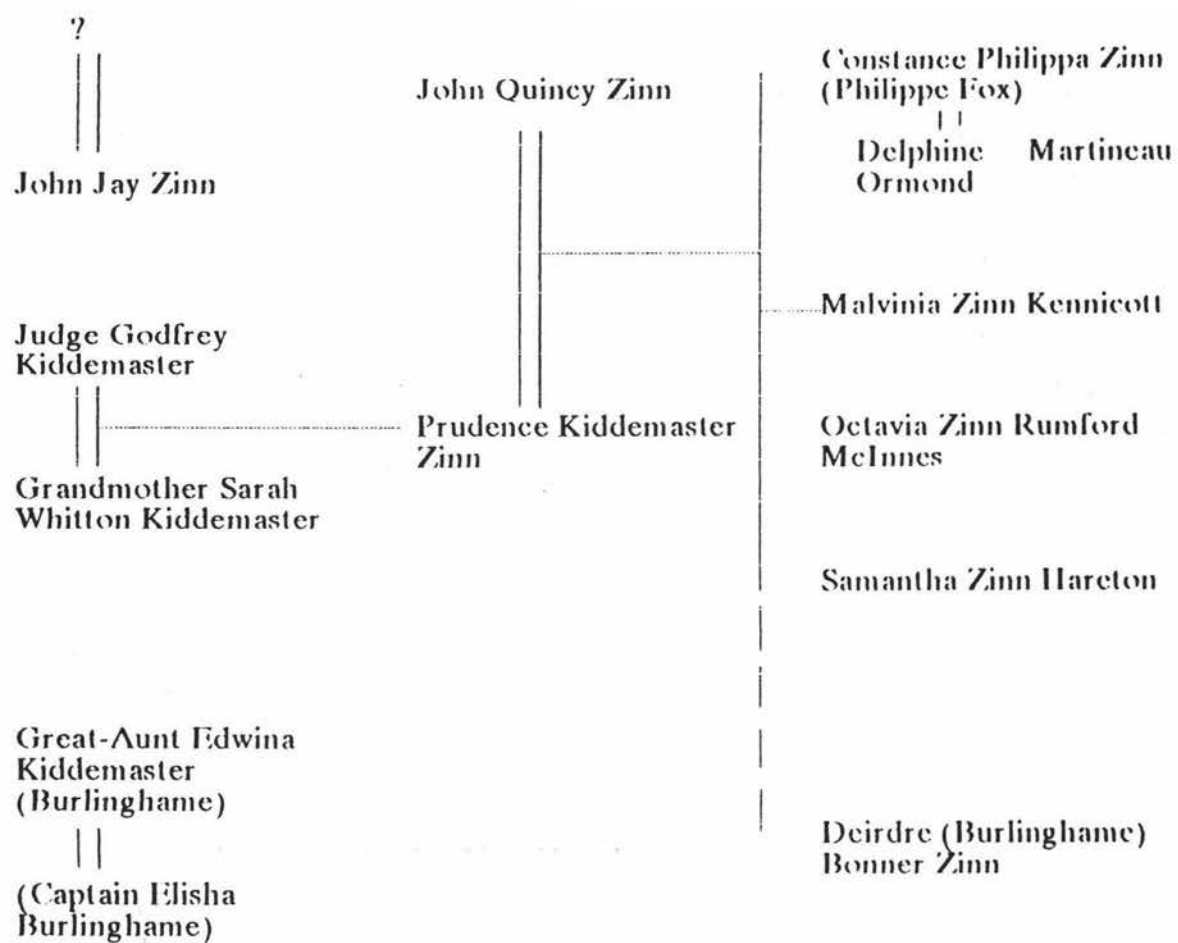


Figure 1: Family Relationships in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*

Preliminary remarks

In the course of preparing to write this study I have read a wide range of Oates criticism. Most of it was not useful to me, because it was either unconcerned with the implications of Oates's writing about women's lives, or it tended to come into the category of what Naomi Wolf calls "victim feminism" – the view that women (whether writers, readers or characters), are somehow purer and better than men, and deserve to be treated as such. The critics whom I found to engage seriously with Oates's writing as woman on women, although I did not always agree with them, were: Eileen Teper Bender, whose book *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence* (1987) gave me many valuable ideas and insights; Linda Wagner, whose collection *Joyce Carol Oates* (1979) contained some useful articles; Joseph Petite, whose four articles on Oates as "liberationist" (1974–88) gave me something to argue against; Joanne Creighton's recent (1992) book *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years*; and Elaine Showalter and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser for the connections between *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and *Little Women*. Oates herself, in her latest collection of criticism (*Woman*) *Writer* (1988), provides interesting commentaries on writing and on her own fiction which often proved a starting point for my own thinking.

For background on the nineteenth century, particularly in the field of women's health, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, by John and Robin Haller, was invaluable. The researches of Carol Smith-Rosenberg and of Lillian Faderman on relations between women in the nineteenth century were of interest also, although I find Faderman's view of the lack of a sexual dimension in these relationships to be rather naive.

More generally, despite the insights I gained from Irigary, Kristeva and others of the French psychoanalytic school, and my wide reading of (particularly American) feminist literary scholars such as Nancy Miller, it has been the recent "popular" books by Marilyn French (*The War Against Women*), Susan Faludi (*Backlash*) and Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth* and *Fire with Fire*) that have most shaped my thinking while being engaged on this work. Whether this is a reflection on the shallowness of my thinking or on the unexpectedly serious tastes of the book-buying public I cannot say.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge support from Professor Richard Corballis and Dr Karen Rhodes, Massey University English Department; Drs Pauline Simonsen and Jenny Curtis for many lively discussions on nineteenth-century mores, Ms Lisa Emerson for reading and enjoying *A Bloodsmoor Romance* with me, and Jane, for her unfailing sense of what is possible and for her love.

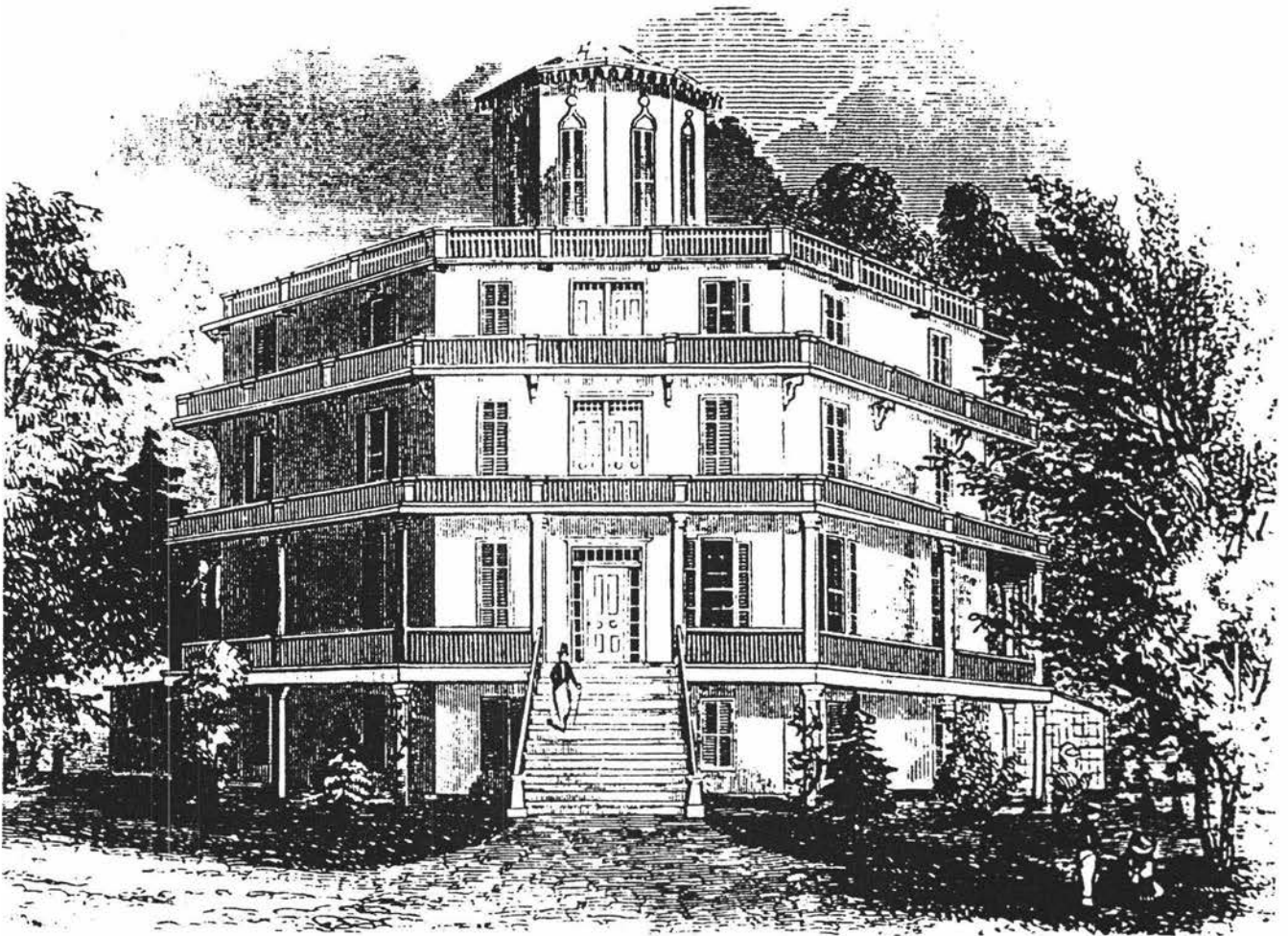


Figure Two: The Octagon House of Orson Squire Fowler, Fishkill, NY, 1845 (New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, NY) (Mc Lanathan 184). See *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, page 11.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Figure One: Family relationships in <i>A Bloodsmoor Romance</i>	iii
Preliminary Remarks	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Figure Two: The Octagon House of Orson Squire Fowler, Fishkill, NY, 1845	vi
Chapter One: An introduction to Oates, <i>A Bloodsmoor Romance</i> , and the key concepts of this study	1
Chapter Two: The objectifications that characters suffer from	15
Figure Three: "Women's Complaints" from <i>A Bloodsmoor Romance</i>	35
Chapter Three: How characters come to perceive their objectification	46
Chapter Four: The attempts that characters make to escape their objectification	67
Chapter Five: The success or otherwise of the escape attempts and a conclusion	97
Works Cited	106
Works Consulted	110