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Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies

Volume 2 | Article 6

2015

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Citation Information

Antolin, Pascale (2015) "Deadly Girls' Voices, Suspense, and the "Aesthetics of Fear" in Joyce Carol Oates's "The Banshee" and "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi"," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 2, Article 6.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.2.6
Available at: http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/vol2/iss1/6

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Deadly Girls' Voices, Suspense, and the "Aesthetics of Fear" in Joyce Carol Oates's "The Banshee" and "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi"

Pascale Antolin
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"Personifying 'evil'—like personifying 'good'—is a human attempt to exert control over the incalculable and impersonal forces of nature of which (though we imagine ourselves superior because we have the gift of language) we are a part, but only an infinitesimal part" (AF[1] 184). This extract from Joyce Carol Oates's 1998 essay "The Aesthetics of Fear" sheds light on her predilection for dark creatures of all kinds that proliferate in her fiction, particularly in her short stories. "The Banshee" and "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi"—first published separately in 2003 and later included in *The Female of the Species,* a collection published in 2006 with the subtitle *Tales of Mystery and Suspense*—are no exceptions.

However, there is another essential dimension to the stories, namely "parodic intertextuality," as Linda Hutcheon calls it (127), which is quite specific to Oates's writing. The title of the collection, "The Female of the Species," was borrowed from a 1911 poem by Rudyard Kipling in which he describes the single-mindedness and moral strength of women as a biological group, while also voicing his opposition to their involvement in politics, and therefore to female suffrage, a topical issue in Britain at the time. Not only did Oates borrow Kipling's title for her collection but she literally exemplified his refrain: "The female of the species is more deadly than the male." In all the stories women of all ages and conditions are represented as murderers. It was

[1] Throughout the article, this particular essay will be referred to as AF.

not the first time that Oates had staged women as murderers[2] but in the two stories even six- and twelve-year-old girls are turned into killers.[3] Oates, therefore, turns her back on conventional images—such as women as the weaker sex and children as symbols of innocence and purity or children as victims—to offer challenging narratives in which both moral values, traditional representations and formal patterns are disturbed, if not distorted.

The purpose of this article is to analyze Oates's use of children's voices in relation to suspense, murder and parodic manipulations in the two stories, by focusing successively on the narrative techniques; ethical, semantic and literary manipulations; and "the powers of horror" (Kristeva) and "the aesthetics of fear."

Narrative Techniques and Manipulation

In the introduction to his book on Alfred Hitchcock's cinema,[4] François Truffaut writes that "the art of creating suspense is also the art of involving the audience, so that the viewer is actually a participant in the film" (Truffaut 16). It is true that Truffaut is talking about cinema and not literature,[5] yet "involving the audience," that is for Oates the readers, is exactly what she does in her stories "The Banshee" and "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi."

"The Banshee" is concerned with an unnamed six-year-old who takes her baby half-brother up the stairs of a high tower to a widow's walk, during a summer party in the family's seaside house. When the story ends, suspense and danger have reached a climax, even if no tragic event has happened yet. The reader has become "a participant," as Truffaut puts it, because of the narrative strategy used by Oates, namely a combination of third person narrative and internal focalization, so that everything is seen through the girl's eyes and only her voice is heard. Thus the reader is led to identify with the focal character, that is the girl, climbing the steps with her increasingly heavy baby-brother in her arms: "Her arm was hurting, too. Where Baby flailed and kicked like a crazed cat, her arm was *so* tired" (49). As exemplified here, repetition is recurrent throughout the story since it is characteristic of both children's speech and suspense fiction (Reuter 76). It emphasizes the sense of danger and therefore the suspense. Even Oates's use of italics further dramatizes the message.

In his analysis of the detective novel, Philippe Reuter writes that "[in a suspense narrative] the reader knows more than any character as he follows them all." And further down Reuter adds that "[the reader] is both omniscient (he can see everything) and, from this point of view, close to the victimizer,

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[2] See "Extenuating Circumstances" (1992) and "The Premonition" (1992).
[3] A child murderer was already involved in an early story, "In the Warehouse" (1973).
[4] The book, *Hitchcock by Truffaut. The Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock by François Truffaut,* is in fact a long interview of Hitchcock by Truffaut.
[5] But Hitchcock said: "A film cannot be compared to a play or a novel. It is closer to a short story, which, as a rule, sustains one idea that culminates when the action has reached the highest point of the dramatic curve" (Truffaut 72).

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.2.6

and powerless (he cannot do anything) and therefore close to the victims and their allies"[6] (76).

Hitchcock agrees on this necessary knowledge;[7] however, he mentions what he calls another "essential ingredient of suspense" (73), that is emotion. This is why choosing a baby, the embodiment of innocence, as a victim and a six-year-old girl not just as main character but also as focalizer is crucial—while the child climbs the steps, the reader is increasingly given access to her thoughts, story, and feelings, and thereby her reasons for taking her baby brother from his crib. The journey of climbing provides for both more information and more suspense—and the reader cannot but sympathize with the little girl, all the more because she has no evil purpose and is unaware of the danger.

The second story, "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi," works somewhat differently since the girl-heroine means to kill and does kill. Her nickname Doll immediately suggests that she belongs in the same family as Tennessee Williams's Baby Doll and Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. Her real age is unknown—though she is said to be eleven to please her clients—and she is made to prostitute herself with strangers in unknown hotels by her father, who pretends to be her stepfather. She ends up killing her client in his bath with a razorblade—as she seems to have done others before him. The story is mostly a third person narrative with an omniscient narrator, and internal focalization is used as well, though it is not clear sometimes who the focalizer actually is. In addition, the focal character changes from one passage to another, and the focalization alternates between the girl, the father, and the client thus producing a highly broken narrative, an upsetting succession of short paratactic, if not elliptic, disconnected paragraphs. Reuter explains that

> the primary characteristic [of suspense novels] remains the constant shifts in perspective that produce the "broken" dimension of a number of writings . . . The reader thus shares the vision of the criminal, that of the victim, his or her allies and witnesses. He can see through their eyes, experiences their emotions and slips in turn "under the skin" of each of them. He is thereby able to adopt antagonistic perspectives that anchor him further in tense psychological configurations. (Reuter 77)

Contrary to "The Banshee," therefore, little identification is possible, and not much sympathy can develop either—the three focal characters appear to be equally evil and pitiful in their various ways. Theoretically, Doll should arouse more sympathy than the other two since she is a child. In some

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[6] I translated all the quotations from Philippe Reuter's *Le Roman policier,* Maurice Lévy's "Gothique, grotesque: Préface à l'ébauche d'une réflexion sur une possible relation" and Paul Ricœur's *Le Conflit des interprétations*.

[7] "Whenever possible the public must be informed" (Truffaut 73).

passages, however, she speaks in the first person singular, addressing the readers in asides like a stage villain sharing her evil purpose with the audience. In her first aside, for instance, she reveals some secret information to the reader: “Unknown to old-fart Daddy I have my neat little razor hidden in my boot. Wrapped in aluminum foil[8] for safety. Maybe yes, maybe no is what I’m thinking” (57). She talks of her razor as if it were a mere toy she may be going to play with. This strategy develops suspense, that is, to quote Hitchcock, “the stretching out of an anticipation” (Truffaut 72), but it prevents sympathy.

No sympathy can develop either from the essentially grotesque description of the girl, half-woman, half-child, in which it is not clear who the focalizer actually is: “In her knee-high white leather boots that grip her slender legs like pythons, in stiletto heels that add several inches to her diminutive height, Doll makes her way with childish carelessness across patches of icy pavement. Her plaited pigtailed milkweed hair bobs winningly about her small head” (53). The image of the “pythons” at the heart of the passage stands out since it is both threatening and strangely masculine, and foreshadows the tragedy to come.

In her book *The Gruesome Doorway*, Paula Uruburu writes that the grotesque “arouse[s] contradictory emotions” (13), but instead of the traditional “repulsion-fascination syndrome” Uruburu mentions, the reader of Oates’s story rather experiences a combination of pity and horror—pity for a twelve-year-old that her father has turned into a prostitute, and horror for the violence of the murder and the remorselessness of the murderer: “Doll tiptoes to the tub to where the naked man awaits her trembling in anticipation and she strikes unerringly with the razor—one! two! three!—in the sawing technique she has perfected, and a four! and five! for good measure with such deadly force . . . that the victim’s head is nearly severed from his body” (74). While the girl-killer is completely emotionless, the reader is turned into a “participant,” as Truffaut puts it (16), if not a party to the crime.

In the two stories, therefore, using children and children’s voices allows Oates to create suspense and increase fear, thus utterly controlling, even manipulating, her readers’ response—to such an extent that their traditional set of references—ethical and semantic in particular—is as disturbed as the literary genres Oates borrows from.

Ethical and Semantic Manipulations, Gothic and Grotesque

“The suspense novel aims at producing an effect,” Reuter writes, “that fundamentally involves toying with the reader’s emotions. Partly linked with the unconscious, they could reach a paroxysm through the reader’s identification with the good-hearted victim” (75). Further, Reuter adds that “the victim is essential in these novels and they are often called ‘victim

[8] The mention of “aluminum foil” may be considered a sign of her childish speech, in sharp contrast with the razor she also mentions. In the passage her ambivalent nature is confirmed by the words she uses.

novels'" (81). In "The Banshee" Oates departs from the conventions of the genre in so far as the reader is not made to identify with the victim (the baby) but with the victimizer, i.e. the six-year-old girl, since she is the focal character. The baby-victim is both kept at a distance—it is only approached through the little girl—and dehumanized in the recurrent images she uses—"the smooth skin like a doll's rubber skin" (41); "Baby flailed and kicked like a crazed cat" (49). The victimizer gradually turns into a victim since her life is increasingly at risk as well. In the story, therefore, Oates closes the semantic gap between victim and victimizer, not just because both children's lives are in danger, but also because the narrative consists in unveiling the girl's story and her parents' responsibility. Oates both manipulates the conventions of suspense fiction and crosses the line between victim and victimizer, innocence and guilt, consciousness and the unconscious.

Especially striking in the girl's long monologue is that it involves double meaning while it questions the notion of truth and the significance of language, as exemplified by the mysterious title of the story:

> And sometimes Mummy was home and with Gerard [the mother's new partner] in the big bedroom, and at such times she did not appreciate being wakened by the screams of a banshee.
> What is a *banshee*, Mummy? She asked, but Mummy seemed not to know, and was annoyed at her for asking. Gerard always knew what a word meant, saying a banshee is some kind of Southwest Indian like Apache. But the Irish girl [the baby-sitter], who kept to herself mostly and rarely said anything to Mummy . . . now said in a thrilled voice, "Oh ma'am, a banshee is a wild spirit sounding like the wind. It screams in the night in a household where someone is soon to die." (41-42)

This seemingly casual family discussion turns out to be symbolic, even ominously prophetic, thus increasing the suspense and placing the question of meaning and semantic ambiguity at the heart of the tale.

While adult discourse proves to be mistaken and therefore unreliable, double meaning characterizes the girl's speech, all the more because her voice surfaces through the narrator's third person narrative. As she tells her story, she obliquely discloses emotions that she is not fully aware of—her sense of solitude and her antagonism both to her parents and to her baby-brother. Hence the hypallage "a lonely summer" (42) for instance—though we can also wonder whether a six-year-old child could truly use this figure of speech. However, the readers are given hints that need to be interpreted, through repetitions and images in particular, and they find themselves somehow in the position of an analyst interpreting a patient's words. This is confirmed both by the girl's disorderly speech—a free evocation of sights, then thoughts and memories—and by her staccato rhythm. Images especially are used to refer to the baby (as seen earlier) and the mother, who is always associated with

metaphors and comparisons: “Oh, there was Mummy: that waterfall of straw-colored hair spilling on bronze-tanned bare shoulders. Laughter like glass-breaking” (38). “Straw” and “bronze” betray the girl’s resentment of her mother while “glass-breaking,” “spilling” and “waterfall” prefigure the tragedy to come. And these negative overtones are emphasized by the use of ellipsis and parataxis—by fragmenting the sentences, Oates both reproduces the girl’s emotions and foreshadows the children’s risk of dismemberment. Repetition is frequently used when speaking of the father: “The flag was Daddy’s flag. But this summer Daddy was gone” (37). And then two pages further: “She hated Daddy, for going away. For leaving Hedge Island. This is the safe place, Daddy used to say. Why’d Daddy say that if it wasn’t true” (37). Though repetition can also be used dramatically for the mother: “Mummy laughed. Like glass being broken” (42).

The question of truth and the meaning of words—“Why’d Daddy say that if it wasn’t true”—are confirmed to be key questions, as shown by a significant digression at the heart of the story: “Only once that summer had Mummy climbed with her to the tower, but Baby had not been with them. The higher we can climb, the clearer our perspective, Mummy said” (44). But when the child reaches the widow’s walk on her own, her experience turns out to be quite different: “But it was disappointing: she could not see them very well, and they could not see her” (45-46). The child can hardly see the people on the ground, and above all they cannot see her. In other words, she cannot be recognized as she wishes to be, particularly by her mother. However, she gains some significant insight:

> When Baby was new, and very little she’d been jealous, maybe . . . She’d cried for Mummy to take Baby back where she’d gotten him. (Why was that silly? Mummy was a shopper! . . . Sometimes Mummy returned what she’d bought in the stores; why couldn’t she take Baby back, too?) . . . She had wanted a puppy but instead she had *a little brother*. (47)

Here Oates takes advantage of the child’s viewpoint and simple logic to introduce humor without resorting to any authorial intrusion or breach of verisimilitude.[9] Above all the suspense narrative turns into a form of initiatory journey since the higher the girl climbs, the more conscious of her resentment she becomes.

Oates, therefore, creates a strange effect of dramatic irony since, by adopting a child’s viewpoint, she also involves the reader in an unexpected questioning of language, meaning, and representation: “She was given to know *there can be only one baby*. She had believed always that she was this baby, but now Baby had come and so she could not be Baby” (39). What the

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[9] In *Fictional Truth*, Michael Riffaterre contends that “[humor] clearly betrays authorial intrusion or indicates a narrator’s viewpoint incompatible with verisimilitude” (xv-xvi).

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.2.6

girl wonders about is the referent for the word "baby," while the readers are given to understand that somehow it all depends on whether or not the word is written with a capital B. Oates explores the potentialities and limits of language since the whole story is characterized by semantic ambiguity and *double entendre* in a deliberately ordinary context, family life, which, according to Reuter, is essential to the reader's identification (80). Meanwhile Oates also rejuvenates suspense fiction and the gothic tale by manipulating—or, as Hutcheon puts it, "de-naturalizing" (49)—their specificities.

In many ways "The Banshee" can be read as gothic fiction. Maurice Lévy explains that "[gothic fiction] depicts the adventures of a heroine who has got lost in the maze of a threatening architecture" (157). It is true that the description of the family house[10] in the opening lines of the tale, as if to set the stage for the story to come, fits the gothic pattern of "a threatening architecture." Above all, Lévy insists on the vertical dimension of the gothic: "The gothic refers to a vertical exploration of human experience from the lower levels, where anguish and horror reign supreme, to the culmination of the most subtle sublimation" (160). Except that in the case of Oates, the traditional references are reversed—it is not the lower but the higher levels that are associated with horror and death. Similarly the girl is not abducted as in traditional gothic tales, she is the abductor, and of a baby boy, though she turns out to be more victim than villain.

In his article Lévy also contrasts the gothic with the grotesque, which, according to him, is associated with "ambiguity or ambivalence" and expresses "an unresolved conflict" (161). These notions perfectly characterize the second story, "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi," as shown by the ambivalent portrait of the girl and the equally ambiguous portraits of the male characters.[11] For here again it is difficult to tell victim from victimizer: the victim is a pedophile, the father a pimp and the victimizer a teenager turned prostitute. If the grotesque develops, it is because the focalization is split among the three characters, so that each appears to be ambivalent, both evil and weak, victimizer and victim at one and the same time. The father always comes across as a "worried" alcoholic who cannot control his daughter (52), hence the significant image he repeats: "that barracuda-flash in Doll's glassy dilated eyes," and on the same page "having caught a glimpse of Doll's barracuda eyes, he has an uneasy premonition" (56). As in "The Banshee," the reader is given information that builds up suspense, all the more since the father refuses to interpret the sign (the flash in the girl's eyes) and face the truth. Thus the question of language and the meaning of words are at the heart

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[10] "On another matching spit of land to the east, the Hendricks' 'cottage'—stately weathered-gray Victorian clapboard, three stories, numerous tall narrow windows, a tower and a widow's walk, steep shingleboard roofs, and a wraparound veranda with a floor of shiny gray it appeared lacquered." (37) It is unlikely however that a six-year old girl could make such a detailed description.

[11] All three of them also have grotesque names. In addition to the daughter called "Doll," the father is named "Ira Early" and the client nicknamed "Mr Radish."

of the second story as well. The pedophile, for instance, considers that he is "a decent guy" and his sexual drives fill him with "disgust" (62). Doll's evil behavior is accounted for in the story—like the girl's behavior in "The Banshee"—as if Oates suggested, like Winnicott, that "we do need to abandon absolutely the theory that children can be born innately amoral" (95). Not only is she turned into a prostitute by her father, but she also lives an unstable life with him because they are always on the move—"Always motels or cabins" (61)—and above all she lost her mother at age two or three under tragic circumstances: "Doll has said indignantly that she *does not believe* 'allegations' that her daddy murdered his wife/her mother, dismembered her corpse, and scattered the pieces along forty miles of the Mississippi south of Minneapolis, weighed down with rocks and never to surface" (59). This passage, focalized by Doll, represents her ambivalent nature because it associates children's words ("her daddy") with brutal details suggesting a press article. In fact Doll perfectly embodies "the antisocial tendency," as it is analyzed by Winnicott in *Deprivation and Delinquency*: "When there is an antisocial tendency *there has been a true deprivation* (not a simple privation); that is to say, there has been a loss of something good that has been positive in the child's experience up to a certain date, and that has been withdrawn" (106). What Oates suggests, therefore, is that murdering men who want to sleep with her is a means for Doll to express her quest for what Winnicott calls "an environmental provision that has been lost" (107). In other words, it is the only "language" she masters because, interestingly, "she has difficulty with words of more than a single syllable or containing unfamiliar consonants" (57). Thus she repeatedly calls her dad "wicked ol' pre-vert" (63).

Doll's story, therefore, is also concerned with language and semantic ambiguity, as suggested by the ironic title "A Romance of the Mississippi." And what is striking about this grotesque story is that there is no way out. Lévy writes that "the realm of the grotesque brushes against the Nonsensical" (163). Thus the grotesque couple, Doll and her father, move around from one "Anonymous Metropolis" (63) to another but never go anywhere, since "Doll has some childish notions, doesn't like to stray too far from the great American river" (53), i.e. the Mississippi. It is where Doll wants to be because it is where her mother's dead body lies somewhere, but she does not seem to be fully aware of it, or she does not want to say so, hence her ambiguous answer: "Ask why, she'll pucker her snippy little face and say, Who wants to know? You? Which is an answer Doll has begun to give often, when she doesn't like Mr. Early questioning her)" (53). And the story ends on a question—"where next?" (76)—which means that father and daughter are on the move again, caught in a vicious circle of (self-)destruction. By contrast, Lévy says, "gothic fiction is laden with meaning in that it essentially points to the sheer chasms that may open up beneath our feet" (163). Thus in "The Banshee," the upward movement involves progress and meaning—while she climbs up the girl makes sense of her emotions; she becomes aware of her

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.2.6

jealousy—even if it also involves death. Whatever may happen to the children on the widow's walk,[12] their journey has come to an end.

"The Aesthetics of Fear" and the "Powers of Horror"

In the two stories, Oates associates "Mystery and Suspense" with the gothic tale, the initiatory narrative, the road novel and the southern grotesque. Thus she creates forceful hybrids—her gothic is northern, her initiatory journey leads to a dead, if not deadly, end, while her American road turns out to be a tragic circle. But no matter what literary mode or genre she draws from and manipulates, no matter what hybrid forms she creates, they definitely refer to "the aesthetics of fear" she is so keen on, a recurrent feature of her stories. In her eponymous essay she defines this aesthetic as "the vehicle by which fear (of mortality, oblivion) is obviated. At least temporarily" (AF 179). Dramatizing fear or creating frightening stories, therefore, appears to be an essential means of appropriation and control. In other words, Oates represents and even dramatizes horror and abjection to put them at a distance. Julia Kristeva explains that "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live," and further, "such wastes drop so that I might live" (3). However Oates also writes that "what we fear most . . . is not death; not even physical anguish, mental decay, disintegration. We fear most the loss of meaning" (AF 185)—hence the overwhelming presence in the tales of references to language, semantic ambiguity and misunderstandings. The reader is required to see through, to decipher whatever is "shown by concealing," as Paul Ricœur puts it (16), for Oates contends that "to lose meaning is to lose one's humanity" (AF 185). The reader's interpretation of the characters' hidden motives and symbolic discourse, therefore, consists not only in making sense of the tales and the characters in them, but in restoring meaning, that is humanity, to these characters, the two girls in particular. In addition, Ricœur explains:

> An exegete is able to apprehend meaning: he wants to take the alien meaning and make it his own; it is thereby his own increased understanding that he chases through the understanding of another being. Any hermeneutical process, implicitly or explicitly, thus entails understanding oneself through understanding another self." (20)

Hence the ontological dimension of hermeneutics. It is not just the characters' humanity that readers assert, it is also their own.

Oates's stories appear to be far more than mere "Tales of Mystery and Suspense." Like Kipling's poem, they mean more than first meets the eye. While they stage young girls as killers, they are not "aberrations"—a word

[12] The name of the place is also significant as far as double meaning is concerned.

Oates rejects when she refers to the "aesthetics of fear" (AF 185)—but rather highly complex, challenging stories. Dramatizing fear and abjection allows Oates to draw a line, a limit; as Kristeva puts it, "dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be" (3). The two tales ultimately refer to what Oates calls "the aesthetic of our common humanity" (AF 185). In addition, as Oates manipulates narrative, language, and meaning, as she associates and distorts different literary genres and modes, the gothic and the grotesque in particular, she compels her readers to interpretation, and therefore to a better understanding of themselves.

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