

# Aesthetic Experience and Ideological Critique in Joyce Carol Oates's "Master Race."

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Cecilia Heath, the protagonist and narrative voice of Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Master Race,"<sup>1</sup> is a 34-year-old art critic who accompanies the renowned Professor of European History Philip Schoen on a three-week trip to Europe. Philip, an American of German origin, who is married and 53, is sent there by the "Peekskill Foundation for Independent Research in the Arts, Sciences, and the Humanities" (568) to interview potential Fellows of the Foundation. The story concentrates on a few days that Cecilia and Philip spend in Mainz, West Germany. Its central event is the rape of Cecilia by a young black American soldier, with which the story begins, and which psychologically recurs in a nightmarish form in Cecilia's dream at the end, where she is again being overtaken by her unknown pursuer.

The text, which for the most part deals with "psychohistorical" issues,<sup>2</sup> with intercultural communication, and with the specific problems of a modern intelligentsia, is thus framed with a scene of terror and violence, with an existential threat to the protagonist's personal identity. However, Cecilia does not communicate her experience to the others, not even to Philip, but keeps it to herself in what could be described as a compulsive-heroic attempt to maintain herself as an autonomous human subject, in spite of this violent attack of brutal, "empirical" reality on her humanist, almost "transcendental" self-concept.<sup>3</sup> This has two main consequences for the aesthetic process of the story. On the one hand, the external experience of violence as the initial shock which sets off the narrative-reflective process of the text is transformed into an internal experience. The confrontation of this highly sensitive and culturally refined woman with the "banality of evil"<sup>4</sup> is turned into a symbolic confrontation with

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "Master Race," *Partisan Review*, 4 (1984): 566-90. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> For this aspect see Rose Marie Burwell, "Wonderland: Paradigm of the Psychohistorical Mode," *Mosaic* 14 (Summer 1981): 1-16.

<sup>3</sup> One is reminded here of Husserl's "transcendental subjectivity" which exists beyond, and independent of, the empirical world. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (Boston: Kluwer, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt's famous diagnosis of the "banality" of the evil of fascism as a monstrous outgrowth of everyday phenomena could well be applied to Oates's conception of evil as an omnipresent potential of the "normal" world. See, for example, H. Arendt, *Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

her subconscious, with the inner contradictions and unresolved conflicts of her psyche which she has hitherto suppressed—and continues to suppress—in her conscious self-image. This creates an internal tension within the narrative perspective between Cecilia's conscious subjectivity and the forces of her repressed subconscious, between the attempt to "rationalize away" the humiliating event ("no one has witnessed her humiliation; and no one need know. Though, surely, humiliation is too extreme a word, too melodramatic?" [567]) and the traumatizing effects of that event on her psyche.

On the other hand, the internalization of the rape scene creates an even stronger tension between the narrative perspective and the external world, because the event which is most crucial to Cecilia—and to the reader—is (at first sight) radically separated from the intellectual-cultural theme and from Cecilia's complicated, uneasy relationship to Philip, which dominate the textual surface of the story. As a result, the narrative perspective assumes a solipsistic quality. It appears strangely cut off from the incidents and dialogues that, like a neutral, mechanical voice, it records. But at the same time, because of its implicit presence in the mind of the narrator—and of the reader—Cecilia's traumatic experience forms a relativizing background, a kind of "deep structure" of negativity which undercuts, as in a continuous alienating effect, the apparent self-sufficiency of the intellectual-cultural world which is presented on the "surface structure" of the text.

The aesthetic experience of the story results from the specific way in which these different and conflicting levels of significance are made to interact in the process of the narrative. There are three main aspects that can be distinguished in this overall aesthetic composition of "Master Race": (1) the aesthetic consciousness of the narrator as an art critic, which significantly influences her perception of the world; (2) the model of an initiation story which the text utilizes and simultaneously ironizes as a representative literary-cultural form, and which mainly structures the psychological action of the text; (3) the organization of the narrated experiences in such a way that it implies a critique of the various ideologies, of the stereotypes and clichés that the story dramatizes as the cultural "material" of the contemporary world, thus establishing a sociopolitical frame of reference.

(1) *Ut Pictura Poiesis*. Influences of Art on the Story's Aesthetic: Cecilia Heath's main interest as an art critic is nineteenth-century American art, particularly George Fuller, on whom she has written a monograph, and John La Farge, on whom she is currently writing another book (583). While George Fuller is noted in art history for his "haunting, dreamlike figure paintings," for his "dark, mysterious canvases out of which emerged strange, glowing figures,"<sup>5</sup> John La Farge, on whom Cecilia has specifically set her academic ambition, contributed to American art the conviction that "the sensuous refinement of art was inseparably mingled with a sense of history and a moving spiritual satisfaction."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, 1973) 9: 996. Joshua Taylor, *The Fine Arts in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979): 110.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor: 116.

There are some elements in the style of "Master Race" which are unmistakably influenced by these aesthetic preconceptions of the narrator's mind. For instance, there is the haunting, "dreamlike" quality which subliminally colors her experiences, and which repeatedly breaks through to the text's surface. She remembers the rape scene "in slow motion" (566); her vision of herself is "hazy and unreliable" (567); her walk across a public square becomes a "nightmarish occasion" which recalls to her the distorted memory of a "dream of childhood and early girlhood" (579)—a characteristic example in the text of a dream turning out as a nightmare, of which the most striking instance is Cecilia's dream at the end of the story, which again invokes initially pleasant childhood memories gradually changing into a catastrophic feeling of impending (self-) destruction.

Also, there is the inclusion of the "historical" dimension in the story, and its combination with contemporary themes. This is particularly emphasized by the fact that Cecilia's companion is a specialist in European history, and that they actually visit—and thus integrate into the story's framework—the historical places of European culture as exemplified by the city of Mainz. Indeed, the mixture of medieval and modern elements, of historical and contemporary architectural styles in the town, to which Cecilia is strongly attracted, seems to correspond to an imaginary architecture in her mind, i.e., to the aesthetic principles of La Farge, who also attempted to combine history and modernity, past and present in his work. Moreover La Farge, like Marc Chagall in St. Stephen's Church at Mainz (Chagall is mentioned twice in the text, 573, 586), designed stained glass windows for American churches; and, again like Chagall—and, for that matter, like Oates in her story—he used biblical and archetypal motifs for expressing his spiritual concerns.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from Fuller and La Farge, and from the surrealist mysticism of Chagall, there are still other potential influences of art on the story's aesthetic conception which are mentioned in the text: the German expressionists Emil Nolde, Otto Dix, and Oskar Moll,<sup>8</sup> whose paintings Cecilia sees at the Mainz Museum. These painters, whom Cecilia "admired enormously" (577), belonged to the group of avant-garde artists who fell under the verdict of *entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art") during the Nazi era, i.e., they represent a strain of art which resisted the political and the concomitant aesthetic ideology of the "master race." The works of these artists uncovered the depths of the subconscious, depicted the grotesque horrors of war and the dehumanizing effects of mass societies, exposed the abysmal difference between people's social masks and their real characters, and yet at the same time they kept up an almost religious belief in the liberating potential of the "soul," and in the possible salvation of humanity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor: 116-17.

<sup>8</sup> The reference in the text (577) is apparently not to Otto Moll but to Oskar Moll (1875-1947), who belonged to the circle of Henri Matisse, and who was dismissed as a professor at the Academy of Arts at Düsseldorf when the Nazis came to power in 1933.

Again, there are some elements in the text which are reminiscent of expressionist themes and techniques—e.g., the shrill, shocking opening with the rape scene; the arrangement of the story in heterogeneous parts, which are not finally reconciled into a harmonious unity; the constant interpenetration of conscious and subconscious levels, of external and internal world; the kaleidoscopic scenario of modern alienation, of historical nightmares having turned into a dubious "normality"; the dramatization of personal identities as social masks—which is illustrated, for example, in Cecilia's use of makeup for the evening dinner to cover up the injuries to her face she suffered at the hands of the rapist, a "mask" which seems to make her in a new, perverse way attractive to the Academic dinner guests: "Perhaps they sense her new, raw vulnerability—perhaps there is something appealing about her porcelain face, her moist red lips" (583).

Various dimensions of art, psychology, and history seem to converge in the final dream vision, which is not only a symbolic expression of Cecilia's subconscious, but also a kind of total "aesthetic" self-experience: angel-like, she seems to float like a Chagall figure, "her physical weight dissolved," and she imaginatively experiences, from the perspective of a child, archetypal scenes from the past and "biblical motifs" like the Great Flood (589); she encounters the elemental, chaotic-creative forces of wind and water (which are so strikingly dominant in Nolde's paintings); and from the flooded world, she sees how "a sunken city is rising slowly to the surface, a city of spires, towers, old battlements, partly in ruins, blackened by fire . . . and now a cathedral of massive dimensions, its highest tower partly crumbled, its edifice stark and grim . . ." (590)—an image which not only recalls Edgar Allan Poe's dark visionary poem "The City in the Sea," but Cecilia's impressions of what has remained of the medieval architecture and churches of Mainz, and thus simultaneously evokes the destructions of the War which form an invisible, but omnipresent background for the actions in the story.

(2) "Master Race" as a Self-Negating Initiation Story: A second aspect of the aesthetic composition of "Master Race" is the underlying pattern of an "initiation story," which gives it a specifically "American" coloring.<sup>10</sup> According to conventional definitions, the story of initiation, with its classical manifestations in Hawthorne, Anderson, or Hemingway, involves the confrontation of a young hero(ine) with the world of adults, of innocence with experience, of naivete with evil, of ignorance with knowledge, i.e., it involves an encounter with hitherto unknown dimensions of reality and of one's own self. It frequently has ritual or mythological overtones and it is usually connected with a symbolic journey between two different worlds which is initiated by a fatherly "mentor," who is counterbalanced by the figure of an evil "tempter." Its effect is a shocking experience of disillusionment, which leads to a severe crisis in the protago-

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<sup>9</sup> For an introduction see Bernard S. Myers, *The German Expressionists: A Generation in Revolt* (New York: Praeger, 1954).

<sup>10</sup> For a definition see Mordecai Marcus, "What is an Initiation Story?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14 (1960): 221-27; and Peter Freese, "Über die Schwierigkeiten des Heranwachsens: Amerikanische stories of initiation von Nathaniel Hawthorne bis Joyce Carol Oates," in *Die Short Story im Englischunterricht der Sekundarstufe II*, ed. P. Freese et al. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979) 206-55.

nist's psyche, and potentially affects and changes his/her whole previous view of life.

Now there are clear references to this pattern in "Master Race." There is the innocent, almost "saintlike" narrator-protagonist Cecilia (nomen est omen), who is confronted with the brutal reality of evil which has been hitherto unknown to her. There is the motif of the journey between a familiar and an alien world—in this case from the US to Germany and back. There is the figure of the fatherly mentor, Philip Schoen, who takes her along on the trip. And there is the contrasting figure of the tempter, personified by the anonymous black soldier, whose group Cecilia, strangely attracted by their "otherness," approaches in a pub. There is the crisis of her consciousness, as illustrated in the archetypical question of all initiation stories, the question of "Why?" which she keeps repeating to herself. There is the encounter with her own isolated, existential self: "It throws you back upon yourself, the starveling little core of yourself. The aloneness" (577). And there is the indication of a subsequent change in her personality, which is signified by her decision to break off her relationship with Philip, and thus to emancipate herself from the dominating influence of this academic father figure.

There are also significant deviations from the conventional model. First of all, in transferring Cecilia's initiation to Germany, Oates supposedly lets her encounter a foreign, non-American world. But in fact it is a black American soldier by whom she is attacked, i.e., what she encounters in the foreign country is her own culture and its inherent conflicts. The black man's attack on her is not only the sexual assault of an individual but is a form of cultural revenge, the revenge of a member of an underclass on the bourgeois class, of a former black "slave" on Cecilia as a member of the white "master race." The divisions of class and race in American society, and the deep-rooted history of aggression that goes with them, are transformed here into a gender conflict, where one cultural victim revenges himself by turning another, physically weaker person—the woman—into his victim.

What is also unusual is the age of the protagonist in this initiation story. At thirty-four, Cecilia, in spite of her intellectual-academic maturity, is still in a state of belated adolescence. Remembering her "first gynecological examination" at eighteen (581), where she was rebuked by the doctor for her refusal to accept biological realities (or institutionalized gender roles?), she reflectively relates his authoritative comment to her present situation: "You better grow up fast./ And so she did. But perhaps she did not . . .?" (582). And yet, in her mental habits and her moral attitudes, she seems at the same time very "wise" and prematurely old, thus when she "takes on, not quite consciously, the voice and manner of Aunt Edie" (578)), it is as if she is paralyzed by her repressive socialization to a degree that she is unable to escape from the terror of her compulsive self-defences.

On the other hand, however, there is yet again a counter-tendency in her characterization which increases the fundamental ambiguity of the text, inscribing a strangely inverted emancipatory meaning into her attitude. In this view, her resistance to experience appears as a desperate form of self-affirmation, of spiritual survival in a world where "experience" seems to be solely defined by violence, aggression, and indifference. In other words, it is a world in

which the experiences one has to have to "know" it are simply not worth having. Consequently Cecilia, while she must recognize the factual reality of the rape and its wider cultural implications, at the same time negates it as a personally significant event, continuing to define herself, in contrafactual independence, as an autonomous human subject.

It is interesting here that Philip, who initially appears as the benevolent fatherly mentor who introduces her to the foreign world of Europe, undergoes a significant reevaluation in the course of the story. In fact, he gradually seems to turn into a kind of "tempter" figure, who is secretly connected with Cecilia's "fall." After the rape scene, he gains an uncanny affinity to the unknown black man, merging with him, in Cecilia's mind, into one ambiguous, potentially threatening figure of the aggressive male, whose one side is defined on a physical, the other on a psychological-intellectual level. Thus, when she returns to the hotel, she hopes to reach her room without being discovered by Philip, who has a separate room nearby, but like a phantom "Philip suddenly appears" behind her (581), distinctly recalling the sudden, frightening appearance of the rapist. As she withdraws into her room and is undressing for her bath, "the telephone rings. It is Philip, agitated, rather more aggressive" (581). It seems that Cecilia's relationship with Philip is irrevocably finished even before she actually decides to break it off, a fact which emphasizes once again the parallel between the two levels of the text and the sense of a symbolic complicity between the two contrasting male characters.

In different ways, then, the pattern of an initiation story, which Oates uses in "Master Race" to structure the action, is ironically reversed in the process of the text. "Master Race" is thus a self-negating initiation story, which in its "subversive conformity"<sup>11</sup> to the culture from which it takes its model, implicitly exposes the empty, futile, paralyzed form that this archetypal "American" model of literary-cultural self-experience assumes under the conditions of a nihilistic world.

(3) Aesthetic Experience as Ideological Critique: This leads to the third aspect of the aesthetic composition of "Master Race," to the ideological critique which is implied in the way the experience of the text is organized. What, then, are the specific ideologies that are evoked and simultaneously deconstructed in the text? The most explicit of them, of course, is the fascist ideology of the "master race" itself which has turned into a historical nightmare that has shaped and continues to overshadow the reality of twentieth-century Europe. Philip Schoen who, as a German-American, self-consciously looks everywhere for traces of that master-race mentality, has no great difficulty in finding them in contemporary Germany (e.g., 571). The stereotype seems to be repeatedly confirmed when Germans behave aggressively towards strangers, and particularly in their attitude towards blacks, whom they treat in Philip's view with complete indifference, rather than with what he sees as the hypocritical politeness of white Americans (575). Also, in the discussions he has with the Germans at the evening dinner, there are unmistakable nationalistic overtones in the

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<sup>11</sup> M.L. Morrison uses this term in her *Subversive Conformity: Feminism and Motherhood in Joyce Carol Oates* (University of Maryland, phil.diss., 1983). It seems to me that this concept can also be applied to Oates's use of literary conventions.

way in which some of these intellectuals, who present themselves as liberal humanists, talk about Hitler, the War, the threat from the East, the fate of European states as "slave states" (587). And the increasingly belligerent, feverishly militant tone of the discussions intensifies for Cecilia, who listens as if from a traumatic distance, the sense of a ruthless rhetoric of power which pervades the otherwise incoherent debate.

But if Oates dramatizes the intellectual ruins of the German master-race ideology, she again uses this concept in a double way in which it simultaneously relates to the American side in this intercultural exchange. Indeed, in the logic of the text Philip Schoen appears as the representative of a new kind of scientific "master race" which, like the superpowers in a political and military sense, has come to dominate the world in an intellectual sense. Philip, after all, represents the Peekskill Foundation, which is an elite institution for scientific and humanist studies. The epistemological bias and the academic practice of the Foundation are ironically illustrated in a "symposium on contemporary philosophical trends" that Cecilia recalls. For what is striking about this conference is that only "scientific" forms of philosophy are represented—"linguists, logicians, mathematicians, a topologist, a semiotician, and others" (571), and that those disciplines dealing with specifically "humanist" questions are absent, "no aesthetician participated, no specialist in metaphysics or ethics" (571). And yet the chairman claims that "all viable philosophical positions" are assembled, and expects that therefore "certain key problems might finally be solved" (571). However, the hubris of this scientific ideology is exposed in the course of the symposium itself, for the exchange of opinions between these "scientists" does not lead them anywhere, and in the competitive-intellectual power struggle in which "each speaker wanted to wipe the slate clean and begin again" (572), they are unable to react constructively to one another and to enter into a communicative cognitive process. The symposium thus virtually deconstructs itself, and also the ideology of a purely formalized science of the humanities which it propagates.

Philip Schoen's attitude to life, to Germany, to his past, is clearly influenced by similar scientific principles. Against Cecilia's subjective, personal reactions to her environment, he insists on the importance of objective, factual knowledge, defining his personal life from his professional perspective: "He believes he knows the German soul perfectly, he says, but by way of his scholarly investigations and interviews primarily; not (or so he hopes) by way of blood. Historical record is all that one can finally trust, not intuition, not promptings of the spirit" (571). But at the dinner with the Germans, Philip undergoes a conspicuous change. In the increasingly chaotic and emotional debate, his initial distance more and more turns into sympathy, ending in his virtual identification with their political views—a reaction which surprises the Germans themselves (588). What is more, Philip not only participates in the power game of the discussion, and in its orgy of intellectual self-dramatization, but he is the implicit center to which the others react. Thus when he afterwards talks to Cecilia about the evening, and tries, with critical comments about the Germans, to reestablish his rational authority ("Wasn't it all supremely revealing? The casual remarks as well as the political -?"[589]), Cecilia reacts with an outburst of laughter which exposes in one, spontaneous gesture Philip's blindness to the self-reflexive implications of his statements, and thus the in-

herent blindness of his professed ideology of science to the complexities of the cultural and intersubjective human reality it claims to "master."

On different levels, then, the aesthetic experience of Oates's "Master Race" is structured as a critique of contemporary ideologies and of their concomitant patterns of cultural power and dominance. In her aesthetic-humanist consciousness, Cecilia Heath is the medium which reveals these various forms of modern alienation and self-deception, but which simultaneously transcends them by affirming, however brokenly and subversively, the principle of a fully realized, morally justified human existence in the face of an amoral, "posthumanist" world.