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IN THE FICTION OF  
JOYCE CAROL OATES

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Family Relationships in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates

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## ABSTRACT

This PhD dissertation analyzes a selected corpus from the American writer Joyce Carol Oates (born in 1938 in Lockport, New York): *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), *Wonderland* (1971), *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996), *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) and *Carthage* (2014) with the objective of demonstrating that the rigid role-enactment which the traditional patriarchal nuclear family exhibits has harmful consequences for the characters, manifested in identity distortion, confusion of roles and conflicts, as well as violence. In this work, the traditional nuclear family is defined as being formed by a heterosexual monogamous married couple with children who live in the same residence. Traditionally, this family structure, which is established upon four basic pillars (property, privacy, protection and gender inequality), has been claimed as the most beneficial social arrangement for its members, an assumption that the PhD questions. In order to prove the initial hypothesis, a multi-layered theoretical approach has been employed by resorting to gender studies, kinships studies, trauma studies and studies on violence, among others. This dissertation predominantly focuses on the relationships between parents and children, which form the subsystems mother-child and father-child, but couple relationships and bonds among siblings, as well as the process of identity formation within families (particularly, during adolescence), have also been taken into consideration

Keywords: Joyce Carol Oates, kinship studies, patriarchy, traditional nuclear family, role distortion.





## RELACIÓNS FAMILIARES NA FICCIÓN DE JOYCE CAROL OATES

O obxectivo desta tese é analizar as relacións familiares que se desenvolven no ámbito da familia nuclear tradicional nun corpus representativo da escritora norteamericana Joyce Carol Oates (nada en 1938 en Lockport, Nova York). O corpus está composto por sete novelas: *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), *Wonderland* (1971), *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996), *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) e *Carthage* (2014). A escolla deste corpus baséase nas súas diversas datas de publicación, que cobren as etapas máis significativas da prolongada carreira literaria de Oates (que abrangue dende o ano 1964 ata o presente); na adherencia dos argumentos das obras á meirande parte da historia estadounidense do século vinte e comezos do século vinteún, unha cuestión da máxima importancia para a escritora, que ten expresado en numerosas ocasións o seu desexo de recrear mediante a súa obra o desaparecido mundo de seus pais, así coma os principais acontecementos históricos de Estados Unidos (coma a grande depresión ou a segunda guerra mundial); na predilección de Oates pola novela fronte a outros formatos de expresión literaria; e finalmente, na adaptación do corpus ás necesidades temáticas da tese.

Tendo observado que nestas obras, o modelo familiar máis recorrente é a familia heterosexual en que cada un dos membros ocupa un rol tradicional e patriarcal de acordo co modelo da familia nuclear clásica, este traballo céntrase en analizar ditos roles mailos subsistemas ós que dan orixe: os roles dos pais, das nais e dos fillos (especialmente durante a adolescencia); mailos subsistemas de nai-pai, nai-fillo/a, pai-fillo/a e irmán-irmán. En particular, a tese pretende analizar as expectativas patriarcais asociadas a estes roles e subsistemas. Como se pode observar, pónse a énfase nas relacións entre pais e fillos (é dicir, nais-fillos e pais-fillos) por considerar que resultan esenciais na

formación da identidade das personaxes das novelas, en especial durante a adolescencia. Non obstante, tamén se examinan os subsistemas nai-pai e irmán-irmán debido á súa influencia no desenvolvemento das personaxes. En concreto, a tese deste traballo consiste en analizar ata qué punto os roles familiares tradicionais e as expectativas e obrigas patriarcais asociadas a eles dentro da familia nuclear clásica teñen un efecto nocivo nas personaxes de Oates, que comunmente provoca non só distorsións nas súas identidades, senón tamén violencia, definida como unha serie de interaccións negativas e física e emocionalmente perxudiciais (ou alo menos, potencialmente perxudiciais), incluíndo coacción ou agresión sexual, intimidación ou agresión física, ameazas, privación de liberdade, etc. No corpus, a meirande parte da violencia ten lugar no seo da familia.

A familia considérase unha das principais formas de agrupación social. É dentro do círculo familiar onde xeralmente os suxeitos adquiren a súa identidade e onde se relacionan con outros por primeira vez. O modelo de familia que Oates presenta con maior frecuencia é o da familia nuclear tradicional, que na súa definición máis básica se considera composta por unha parella monógama e heterosexual con fillos que conviven no mesmo espazo. Na súa vertente máis tradicional, este tipo de familia adopta unha serie de roles familiares ríxidos e estáticos que manifestan unha evidente desigualdade segundo o xénero dos seus membros.

Tras analizar diferentes aproximacións ó concepto de familia por parte de varios autores, na tese defínese a familia coma un grupo de persoas non necesariamente relacionadas por lazos sanguíneos (ou ben unha parella que ten unha relación de interdependencia) e que comparten un sentimento de pertenza á unidade familiar. Estas relacións son idealmente estables e duradeiras, e distínguense polos seus lazos de afecto, intimidade, reciprocidade, cooperación, compromiso e/ou solidariedade. As familias son o contexto onde se adoita desenvolver a identidade persoal, e onde se adquiren coñecementos e destrezas básicas coma a linguaxe. Polo xeral, as familias tenden a exhibir unha serie de roles, normas e expectativas para cada un dos seus membros. As familias, por último, funcionan no contexto máis amplo da sociedade. A tese conclúe, pois, que a familia

non é un concepto obxectivo e estable, senón unha construción que depende do xeito en que cada individuo ou sociedade percibe e interpreta o seu entorno; é dicir, non se trata dun concepto estático senón maleable; e que ademais soe exhibir un desequilibrio de poder nese núcleo. Isto demóstrase presentando un percorrido polas transformacións que atravesou a familia durante o século vinte nos Estados Unidos, así coma unha clasificación dos distintos tipos de familias.

Nesta tese, a familia nuclear tradicional defínese coma un grupo familiar conformado por tres roles básicos: o pai/marido, a nai/esposa e os fillos; unidos os pais por matrimonio e os pais fillos pola lexitimidade do seu nacemento dentro do mesmo. A sociedade patriarcal presenta correntemente ás familias nucleares coma a forma de agrupamento social máis harmoniosa e beneficiosa para os seus membros.

A familia nuclear tradicional aséntase sobre catro piares básicos: privacidade, propiedade, protección e desigualdade de xénero. A privacidade destas familias implica a súa concepción coma grupos autónomos, mentres que o concepto de propiedade concede ó pai/marido o total control de mulleres e nenos. Este control é ás veces exercido pola descendencia masculina. A protección que supostamente se dá nestas familias pregoa a seguridade dos seus membros. Por último, estas familias teñen unha forte división de tarefas de acordo co xénero: os homes manteñen á familia co seu traballo remunerado no ámbito da esfera pública, mentres que as mulleres coidan os nenos e encárganse das tarefas do fogar dentro da esfera privada.

Na ficción de Oates, a rixidez asociada á familia nuclear clásica tende a orixinar conflitos, confusións de roles e violencia de diverso tipo. É precisamente esta coincidencia da centralidade da familia e a violencia na narrativa oatesiana o que nos leva a examinar a relación entre ambos fenómenos, e a formular a hipótese inicial de que a execución tradicional dos roles de pai, nai e fillo/a xeran unha serie de desequilibrios no seo da familia así coma a aparición de violencia na ficción de Oates.

Máis especificamente, examinamos o rol do pai coma o cabeza de familia autoritario e principal sustento económico da mesma; a nai,

centrada na súa faceta reprodutiva a expensas da súa faceta produtiva e creativa, e relegada ó fogar e á crianza dos fillos; e os fillos, que neste traballo se analizan principalmente durante a adolescencia, unha fase vital pola que Oates sinte un destacado interese, e que nos serve de premisa para examinar cómo se desenvolve a identidade persoal das personaxes dentro do marco da familia nesta etapa vital. Estas análises reflíctense na estrutura da tese, composta por catro capítulos principais, titulados “Pais e nais,” “Nais,” “Pais” e “Fillos/as,” precedidos dunha introdución e dun capítulo inicial adicado a expoñer a vida e carreira de Joyce Carol Oates e os conceptos básicos que se manexan no resto do estudo. A tese péchase coas conclusións e un apéndice que inclúe o resumo das novelas do corpus.

A introdución a este estudo presenta os obxectivos da tese, a hipótese xeral, a estrutura, a metodoloxía e o marco teórico. O primeiro capítulo, titulado “Información preliminar,” comprende a biografía de Oates e unha concisa introdución ós conceptos básicos da tese: a familia, os roles e a violencia. O corpo da tese está formado polos capítulos “Pais e nais,” “Nais,” “Pais” e “Fillos/as,” que presentan unha organización paralela. É dicir, estes catro capítulos comezan coa presentación das definicións e descrições dos principais trazos do rol familiar que se examina, así coma as restricións e obrigas sociais asociados a el, tomando numerosos exemplos do corpus. A continuación, os capítulos examinan as relacións entre os diversos subsistemas dos seus respectivos roles: en “Pais e nais,” analízanse as relacións entre a parella que dá orixe á familia; en “Nais,” as relacións nais-filas e nais-fillos; en “Pais,” as relacións pais-filas e pais-fillos e en “Fillos/as,” as relacións entre irmáns. O capítulo “Conclusións” recolle os principais achados que se descubriron durante a investigación.

O marco teórico empregado encádrase polo xeral dentro dos estudos de xénero, composto por ensaios en feminismo e masculinidades. As obras deste ámbito consultadas con maior frecuencia son *Gender. Psychological Perspectives* (2005) de Linda Brannon, que achegou unha ampla gama de conceptos relacionados co xénero e sexo; *Gender and Social Psychology* (1998) de Vivien Burr, que propón definicións de patriacado; e o artigo “Men, Fathers and the

State: National and Global Relations” (2002) de Jeff Hearn, que describe a hexemonía masculina.

Aparte de recorrer a estudos de xénero, a tese exhibe un achegamento interdisciplinario ás obras do corpus, xa que se considerou que éste podería infundir ó estudo un enfoque máis preciso e minucioso. En concreto, recórrese a investigacións sobre a familia, especialmente a exposta por David White e Anne Woollet no seu libro *Families. A Context for Development* (1992), empregado recorrentemente ó longo da tese para explicar o desenvolvemento individual dentro da familia e os seus procesos sociais, emocionais e cognitivos, e as representacións da paternidade e adolescencia. Outras obras de referencia de similar relevancia son *Crisis familiares: Causas y repercusiones* (1983) de José Antonio Ríos González, e o artigo “La familia: Formas y funciones” (1994) de Gonzalo Musitu e Juan Herrero.

Os estudos sobre maternidade centráronse en *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1991) de Adrienne Rich, *Las contradicciones culturales de la maternidad* (1998) de Sharon Hays e *The Irigaray Reader* (1997) de Luce Irigaray, entre outros. A paternidade analizouse principalmente coa axuda de “The Good Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall” (1997) de Jesse Bernard, *Fathers and Adolescents. Developmental and Clinical Perspectives* (1997) de Shmuel Shulman e Inge SeiffgeKrenke, e *Making Men into Fathers. Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood* (2002) de Barbara Hobson e David Morgan. Finalmente, a adolescencia estudouse tomando coma referencia as obras *Adolescence* (2001) de John W. Santrock, “New Aspects of Family Relations” (2000) de Eugenia Scabini e “From Adolescence to Young Adulthood: A Family Transition” (2000) de Margherita Lanz.

Os estudos sobre violencia abranguen obras como *Family Violence Across the Lifespan* (1997) de Ola W. Barnett, Cindy L. Miller-Perrin e Robin D. Perrin, ou *From Pain to Violence. The Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness* (2006) de Felicity De Zulueta. Aparte disto, empregáronse investigacións máis concretas sobre aspectos específicos da violencia presente no corpus: violencia psicolóxica, analizada entre outras obras en “Psychological Maltreatment of Women” por Richard M. Tolman, Daniel Rosen e Gillian Cara Wood’s en 1999; abusos

físicos infantís en “Child Physical Abuse: Theory and Research” (1999) de Joel S. Milner e Julie L. Crouch; violación no artigo online “Emotional and Psychological Impact of Rape” (2008) e *bullying* en “School Bullying: An Overview” (2002) de Gordon MacNeil.

Ademais, empregáronse estudos sobre trauma (“Trauma and Grief: A Comparative Analysis” de Margaret Stroebe, Hank Schut e Wolfgang Stroebe, 1998), perda (*The Shell and the Kernel* de Nicolas Abraham e Maria Torok, 1994), e identidade (*Persons: Understanding Psychological Selfhood and Agency* de Jack Martin, Jeff H. Sugarman e Sarah Hickinbottom, 2009), entre moitos outros manuais aplicados a cuestións que aparecen no corpus en menor medida, como por exemplo, a obra de Carl Jung, analizada en “La psique creativa: principales aportaciones de Jung” (1999) de Sherry Salman.

Tamén se recorre á crítica literaria de Oates para complementar a investigación. Algunhas das obras máis comunmente referenciadas son *Lavish Self-Divisions. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* de Brenda Daly (1996), *Joyce Carol Oates* (1980) de Ellen G. Friedman e *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* (1987) de Greg Johnson. Por último, as entrevistas, artigos, e demais obras de ficción de Joyce Carol Oates foron una fonte de coñecemento imprescindible nesta investigación, especialmente a colección de artigos (*Woman) Writer. Occasions and Opportunities* (1989), o artigo “New Heaven and Earth” (1972), e a entrevista “Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates” (2003).

Os principais descubrimentos realizados nos catro capítulos principais da tese permiten confirmar a hipótese inicial: a rixidez dos roles da familia nuclear patriarcal comunmente produce conflitos, confusión de roles e mesmo violencia. Máis concretamente, no capítulo “Pais e nais,” analízase a evolución dunha parella dende o noivado ata o matrimonio en *Wonderland*, caracterizada pola forte posesividade de Jesse Vogel cara a súa muller Helene Cady; e polo asentamento do matrimonio sobre a ilusión de que o outro membro da parella cumpre á perfección o seu rol dentro da familia patriarcal. Deste xeito, Jesse reduce a Helene á súa función reprodutiva; mentres que Helene contempla ó seu home coma unha figura necesaria para cumprir o seu (non desexado) destino coma muller: converterse en nai e esposa. Estas abstraccións inevitablemente producen insatisfacción dentro da parella,

e dan conta da rixidez do subsistema que conforman. O capítulo tamén analiza os diversos tipos de matrimonio: os chamados matrimonio de compañía, independencia e interdependencia; así coma os distintos estilos de educación que os pais dan ós seus fillos: autoritaria, democrática, indiferente e permisiva. O estudo da evolución temporal de ambas experiencias permitiunos comprobar a súa progresiva democratización. Así mesmo, comprobamos a influencia da relación de parella nos fillos, e a interdependencia dos subsistemas de pais e fillos no tocante á educación destes últimos: é dicir, sen dúbida os pais inflúen nos fillos co seu estilo de educación, pero os fillos tamén alteran o tipo de educación que reciben coas súas actitudes, o que resulta evidente en *them*, onde Maureen Wendall, a filla obediente, recibe máis responsabilidades da súa nai que os seus descoidados irmáns.

O capítulo “Nais” presentou a chamada institución da maternidade coma un resultado da intervención patriarcal na experiencia natural da maternidade debido ó seu intento de controlar a capacidade reprodutora das mulleres, convertendo deste xeito un rol natural e corporal nun rol social. Unha das obrigas sociais máis prominentes da institución da maternidade é a de lexitimar o nacemento dun fillo por medio do matrimonio, como se exemplifica no caso de Clara Walpole de *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, que lexitima ó seu fillo ilexítimo casando cun terratenente coa esperanza de darlle un futuro mellor. O capítulo tamén se centra na transmisión das actitudes patriarcais de nais a fillas, como se describe en *Wonderland*, onde a señora Pedersen e Helene transmiten ás súas fillas Hilda e Shelley a súa restritiva visión das perspectivas de futuro para unha muller. A falta de autoestima e autonomía destas nais provoca que ambas fillas desenvolvan un sentido da identidade débil e maleable, metaforicamente representado na súa relación coa comida: Hilda é unha rapaza obesa debido ó asfixiante exceso de amor/comida que recibe da súa nai, mentres que Shelley, privada do cariño e atención maternais, está esquelética. Esta obesidade e delgadeza tamén son o resultado da relación das fillas cos seus pais: Hilda vese abafada polas esixencias de seu pai e refúxiase na comida, e Shelley é obxecto da persecución incestuosa de seu pai, polo que tenta que o seu corpo sexa menos atractivo renunciando a unha ingestión equilibrada de alimentos. En conclusión, as relacións nai-filla do corpus

raramente presentan un equilibrio emocional, coa excepción de Arlette Mayfield e as súas fillas en *Carthage*. De feito, algunhas fillas, coma Maureen en *them*, séntense coma se non tivesen nai debido ó abandono emocional que sofren por parte destas. Neste caso, ademáis, Loretta provoca na súa filla Maureen unha confusión de roles ó forzala a asumir as facetas de nai e esposa que ela non desexa exercer, o que á súa vez provoca unha confusión de roles entre Maureen e o seu agresivo padrastro que culmina nun ataque físico contra a moza.

Observamos tamén cómo o confinamento das nais da familia nuclear tradicional á esfera privada dificulta a súa participación no mercado laboral no corpus: historicamente, ás nais só se lles permitía traballar por un salario para manter ás súas familias, pero non para obter satisfacción persoal. En *Expensive People* e *Little Bird of Heaven*, Nada Everett e Zoe Kruller desafían estas normas traballando coma escritora e cantante, respectivamente, o que lles ocasiona varios conflitos coas súas familias, que en xeral non aproban estas decisións. O caso de Nada é particularmente complexo, posto que representa a relación entre procreación e creatividade ó intentar integrar equilibradamente a súa identidade como nai e escritora, facetas que parece considerar compatibles; ó contrario que o seu fillo Richard, que desexa que se adique exclusivamente ó seu rol coma nai. Polo tanto, como se aprecia en *Expensive People*, as relacións nai-fillo do corpus caracterízanse pola obsesión dos fillos por controlar e posuír ás súas nais. Ademais, o estudo de *Expensive People* e de *A Garden of Earthly Delights* permitiunos comprobar cómo as personaxes femininas da fase temperá da narrativa de Oates non reclaman poder e autonomía no seu propio nome, senón a través dun home, usualmente o marido ou fillo. Isto é particularmente problemático en *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, onde Swan, o fillo de Clara, sofre as consecuencias desta privación, posto que se sente coaccionado a herdar o poder de seu pai, un papel que só desexa parcialmente, e que, unido á súa crise de identidade, culmina no asasinato de seu padrastro e o seu suicidio.

O capítulo “Pais,” coma o de “Nais,” tamén distingue entre a experiencia social da paternidade e a meramente biolóxica. Non obstante, no caso dos pais, esta distinción serviu para outorgarlles un poder case absoluto ós pais dentro da familia, e non para confinalos ás



súas capacidades reprodutivas coma no caso das mulleres. Este capítulo pivota sobre a expectativa de rol paterno de que os pais deben manter e dominar ás súas familias. Coma resultado disto, a meirande parte dos pais do corpus desenvolven unha concepción extremadamente ríxida do seu papel, sendo incapaces de adaptarse ós cambios que os membros da familia sofren. Isto reflíctese en *We Were the Mulvaney*, onde Michael Mulvaney non logra superar a perda da imaxe da súa perfecta e virxinal filla Marianne despois que de a violen, polo que a expulsa da familia. Os pais de *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, *them*, *Wonderland* e *Little Bird of Heaven* son similarmente incapaces de adaptarse á evolución das súas fillas ou das súas estruturas familiares e xeran conflitos que usualmente culminan en actos de violencia (ou risco de violencia) contra as súas fillas, o que se contrapón á suposta protección dos fillos dentro do núcleo familiar.

A relación pais-fillos do corpus é tamén convulsa, e demostra que incluso unha perfecta execución do papel de provedor da familia non sempre resulta en satisfacción persoal, coma no caso de Elwood Everett en *Expensive People*. Curiosamente, neste caso, o seu fillo Richard, que se adscribe a unha concepción totalmente patriarcal da familia, desexa un pai máis tradicional e autoritario. O caso contrario apréciase en *them*, onde Jules Wendall desexaría ter un modelo de pai máis positivo coa Howard, o seu agresivo pai biolóxico, enormemente frustrado pola súa incapacidade de manter á súa familia. Ambas novelas reflicten a enorme carga emocional que produce unha adherencia total ás esixencias dos roles da familia nuclear clásica.

Por último, en “Fillos/as,” analízase a aparición relativamente recente da etapa da adolescencia, así coma o proceso de formación de identidade que atopa o seu punto álxido en dita etapa, na que resulta esencial a relación co Outro. Estes procesos de formación ilústranse coas experiencias de Cressida de *Cartaghe* e Jesse de *Wonderland*. En Cressida compróbase como unha adherencia excesiva da propia identidade a referentes familiares pode resultar nociva na creación da individualidade, especialmente unha vez que Cressida vai á universidade e se atopa fóra da área de influencia do seu famoso apelido, polo que debe confrontar a súa identidade nos seus propios termos. O conflito que isto produce fai que desapareza da súa casa durante varios

anos e mesmo adopte unha identidade falsa ata que finalmente é quen de retornar para tentar asumir e definir a seu auténtico ser. Pola contra, para conformar a súa identidade, Jesse sente a necesidade de recorrer a unha serie de referentes familiares encarnados por unha serie de figuras paternas que invariablemente o acaban por abandonar. Estes referentes teñen unha actitude extremadamente sexista, agresiva e ególatra que Jesse absorbe ata o punto de distanciarse das demais persoas e pretender atalas á súa vontade. Jesse é o froito do que Oates chama a traxedia do ego illado, é dicir, a dunha personaxe xorda á autonomía dos que o rodean e totalmente enfocada a satisfacer os seus anhelos.

Por último, o capítulo conclúe co escrutinio das relacións entre irmáns exemplificadas por Maureen e Jules de *them*, cuxas vidas seguen ciclos paralelos que nos permiten comprobar a interdependencia dun no outro e os seus esforzos por prosperar e superar as lacras do ambiente desfavorecido e convulso no que se crían, o Detroit dos anos sesenta, que Oates coñece perfectamente por ter vivido nesta cidade varios anos (incluíndo o ano 1967, onde se produciron unhas violentas revoltas), unha experiencia que marcou a súa carreira profesional e influenciou o seu interese pola violencia.

En conclusión, a tese confirma a hipótese inicial ó atopar numerosos exemplos de familias nucleares tradicionais tan inflexibles que provocan enfrontamentos, violencia e confusión de roles. Especificamente, comprobamos que a privacidade que estas familias afirman posuír é en grande medida unha ilusión, posto que se atopan conectadas ó resto da sociedade por innumerables redes de apoio coma as institucións ou as amizades. Ademais, a defensa do dereito á privacidade extrema ten ocultado elevados niveis de violencia ós ollos da sociedade, como se ve no corpus da tese. Tamén puidemos desbotar a idea de que estas familias son refuxios seguros para os seus membros ó describir varios casos de violencia nos seus seos. Por outra banda, o carácter posesivo destas familias, encarnado na figura do pai, revelouse coma a orixe de enfrontamentos e actos de agresión. Finalmente, a discriminación en base ó xénero percíbese coma a orixe dunha serie de desequilibrios dentro da familia, como por exemplo a crenza de que os conceptos de procreación e creatividade son incompatibles.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this PhD is analyzing the family relationships of the traditional nuclear family unit in a reduced but representative corpus from the author Joyce Carol Oates, consisting of seven novels that cover the most significant phases of her career, namely, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), *Wonderland* (1971), *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996), *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) and *Carthage* (2014).<sup>1</sup> Taking into account that the most recurrent family model in this corpus is that of an heterosexual family in which the members assume the traditional roles of the classical nuclear family, we shall try to analyze these roles and the family subsystems they originate: that is, the roles of fathers, mothers and children (mainly during their adolescence) and the subsystems of mother-father, mother-child, father-child and siblings, particularly focusing on the patriarchal expectations linked to the enactments of such roles. The PhD is especially focused on the relationships between parents and children (namely, mother-child and father-child) because they are crucial for the development of the characters' identity in the novels of the corpus, particularly during adolescence. In any case, we have also considered that the influence of the subsystem father-mother and the siblings' subsystem is decisive for the personal development of a character, and thus we have included the pertinent information about these two subsystems in their corresponding chapters. Therefore, the thesis of this PhD consists in observing to which extent the traditional roles and the traditional expectations associated with the traditional nuclear family usually have a harmful effect on Oates's characters which often causes identity distortions as well as violence.

The centrality of the family for most societies has been often stated: the family is frequently considered the social institution that stands at

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Garden*, *Expensive*, *them*, *Wonderland*, *Mulvaney*s, *Bird* and *Carthage*, respectively.

the very center of society, and the most important group to which a person belongs through her/his life, as Hutter affirms (“Multicultural” 5). Similarly, Ríos González describes the family as a primary human group (17). In fact, the family is usually the ground where children first relate to others, gain language, and acquire their individual identities. The family is also a central theme in Oates’s fiction, where she has explored the evolution of American families through most of the twentieth century, as well as the personal evolution of its individual members.

The family model which is most commonly portrayed by Oates is the nuclear family, defined by Wykes and Welsh as the standard model of family in Western society, consisting of a married, monogamous heterosexual couple with children, sharing a living space (92). In its traditional enactments, the nuclear family holds rigid, static and demanding roles and obligations, as well as gender inequalities. In Oates’s fiction, at the core of these families, we often find disfunction, conflicts, confusion of roles, and violence of diverse types. Creighton explains the relation between family and violence in Oates by remarking that she recurrently focuses on the same aspects of human experience, dramatizing uncountable times the deterministic influence of environment and family. Thus, human emotions are bonded with complex geographical, sociological, economic and especially family ties, which are repeatedly explored by Oates. The disorienting, frightening, sometimes ennobling and sometimes debasing power of love and sex and the relations caused by these forces are at the center of Oates’s fiction. Moreover, she is fascinated by violence, whether as a release from intolerable emotional pressure or as an attempt to simplify or rebel against the incomprehensible and meaningless; or as an attempt to create a bond with another person; or as a gratuitous sadistic act. She explores cognitive and actual violence, and both contained and uncontrolled emotional duress (*Joyce* 40).

Noticing thus the pervading presence of violence and negative interactions at the core of the family in Oates, we intend to examine the correlation between these two phenomena, taking as an initial hypothesis the fact that a traditional performance of the roles of father, mother and children within the family unit commonly causes a set of

unbalances and distortions in the family, as well as the appearance of violence in Oates's fiction. The specific roles on which we focus are the father, in his position as the head of the family and the sole breadwinner who holds an absolute power over the members of his family; the mother, usually reduced to her procreative and nurturing function at the expense of her creativity, productivity and other possible interests, and relegated to the home, where she is expected to comply to her husband's will; and finally, the children, mainly analyzed during their adolescence since this is the development stage upon which Oates has placed more emphasis, and which serves as a premise to examine how individual identity emerges and evolves. Apart from analyzing the specific conditions of each role, a special focus shall be placed upon the relationships among them, which have an effect on the whole family and on the personal development of its members.

Given the large list of Oates's works of fiction,<sup>2</sup> it was not easy to make a selection for the present study. The choice of the corpus was based upon three main criteria: finding an appropriate genre for the purposes of the PhD, selecting works that were representative of different phases and aspects of Oates's extensive career, and finally, choosing works with plots and characters adjusted to the thematic needs of this research. Seven novels compose the corpus of our study: *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, *Expensive People*, *them*, *Wonderland*, *We Were the Mulvaney's*, *Little Bird of Heaven* and *Carthage*.

First, the selected genre was the novel, since its long plots and detailed descriptions provide numerous scenes which could be used to illustrate our hypotheses, a view that Oates herself has sustained: "A

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<sup>2</sup> Oates has written approximately forty-nine novels, sixteen non-fiction books, two memoirs, forty-two short story collections, twelve novellas, eleven theater plays, ten compilations of poetry, five young adult fiction books and three books for children. Several possible reasons have been argued to explain this prolific career. First, her family circumstances: her parents had toilsome lives and her strict work ethic dates back to American puritanism. Second, there are psychological factors: for her, literature became an escape from the threatening world of her childhood and the turbulent social realities of America; that is, it became a means of creating an imaginative "counterword" that reflected a violent society but kept the author safe. Third, Oates herself explains that she loves her work, which for her is not "work" at all. Finally, part of her eagerness to finish her work-in-progress is due to her sense of mortality: she is often afraid she might not complete it (Johnson *Invisible* 159, 295).

novel is so capacious, elastic and experimental a genre, there is virtually nothing that it can't contain, however small and seemingly inconsequential" ("Afterword" *Garden* 2006, 399-400). Coincidentally, the novel is Oates's favorite genre, as she asserts: "[s]hort stories are like snapshots. The novel is a sustained vision of a complete world" ("Tracking" 4). An alternative reason is that, for Oates, writing is a way to preserve memories of a fading world, that of her ancestors, and she finds that the ideal format for this is the novel:

no other art form is so dependent upon and so infatuated with memory, as the novel: the novelist can be defined as one who, in the guise of fiction, is involved in a ceaseless memorialization of the past. ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 483)

Second, in order to find significant works which could illustrate Oates's career and the evolution of her subject matters and characters, the selection should comprise novels published in various decades, particularly, from the late 1960s to the twenty-first century. In fact, the novels of the corpus extend along the main phases of Oates's career, as described in the first chapter of the present study: *Garden* belongs to the first phase; *Expensive, them* and *Wonderland* are inserted in the second phase; *Mulvaneys* is part of the fifth phase; *Bird* belongs to the sixth phase and *Carthage* to the seventh phase. Four of these novels (i. e., *Garden*, *Expensive, them* and *Wonderland*), which were written in the initial stages of Oates's career, conform the Wonderland Quartet, a thematically unified saga settled mostly around the Detroit (Michigan) area, and centered on the distribution of power in the United States and in the identity evolution of young men. The common traits of the quartet infuse unity and coherence to the corpus.

The third and final criterion was selecting a corpus that matched the required thematic needs; specifically, these seven novels mostly present traditional nuclear families in which the rigidity of the roles leads to distortions that originate identity conflicts, role reversal and violence. The historical context of the novels was also taken into account, since Oates attaches much importance to the United States historical and sociocultural evolution, as well as to the evocation and

celebration of her past. In her works, this serves not only as a historical background but acquires the crucial role of reflecting the characters' specific situations and dilemmas:

Much of literature is commemorative. Home, homeland, family, ancestors. Mythology, legend. [j] Much of my prose fiction is “commemorative” in essence—it is a means of memorializing a region of the world in which I have lived, a past I’ve shared with others, a way of life that might seem to me vanishing, thus in danger of being forgotten. Not an “old” America but rather an “older” America—those years described as the Depression, through World War II, the Vietnam War, the 1960s, and so forward to the present time in upstate, quasi-rural America. [j ] Commemoration is identical, for me, with setting. Where a story or a novel is set is at least as significant as what the story—the plot—“is.” In my fiction, characters are not autonomous but arise out of the very physicality of the places in which they live, and the times in which they live. (Oates *Soul* 33)

In this sense, these seven novels cover most of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Specifically, *Garden* extends from 1920 into the middle of the 1960s, the main events in *Expensive* take place in 1960, *them* covers the period from 1937 to 1967, *Wonderland* starts in 1939 and finishes in 1971, the main storyline from *Mulvaney*s comprises the decade of the 1970s and ends in 1991, whereas *Bird*'s plot is settled between 1983 and 2002, and finally, *Carthage* covers the years 2005 to 2012.

The structure of this study is designed to offer a detailed approach to the main thesis in a comprehensive manner. Thus, this introduction inaugurates the discussion by offering an account of the objectives of the PhD, the justification for the selection of the corpus (there is also a summary of the novels in an appendix at the end of this study), the structure, and the methodology and theoretical framework. The introduction is followed by a brief chapter entitled “Preliminary Information,” comprising the main facts of Joyce Carol Oates's life, her literary career and her interests, as well as an introduction to some of

the fundamental notions that shall be developed in the PhD: family, family roles, and violence.

The main body of the PhD occupies chapters two, three, four and five, entitled “Parents,” “Mothers,” “Fathers” and “Children.” The names of the chapters reflect our decision to focus the study of the corpus on the relations between parents and children. However, we have also considered the relationships mother-father and the bond between siblings, represented by the relationships of Helene-Jesse in *Wonderland* and Maureen-Jules in *them*. These four chapters have a parallel structure: they begin by presenting, defining and describing the main traits of the roles of these family members, as well the traditional restrictions and expectations linked to them, drawing examples from the corpus as an illustration of the theory. Afterward, the chapters focus on the relations between the members of the main subsystems associated with their roles, that is, in “Parents,” wife-husband relationships; in “Mothers,” mother-daughter and mother-son relationships; in “Fathers,” father-daughter and father-son relationships; and in “Children,” siblings’ relationships. This analysis will reveal problems of possessiveness and control, violence and role distortion and reversal, among others.

In the second chapter, “Parents,” we analyze a couple’s transition to parenthood using the case of Helene and Jesse from *Wonderland* as an example, and explaining their evolution from being an engaged couple into marriage and then parenting, analyzing the main changes that these processes bring into their relationship. At the same time, the study of their relationship allows us to introduce the themes of the body, control and possessiveness. These last two topics are determinant in Oates, because they are related to one of her central ideas, the tragedy of the self-centered ego, that is, the catastrophic consequences of trying to impose on others the will of an ego that believes itself omnipotent. The refusal to perceive the Other is indeed presented as dreadful in her fiction. Subsequently, we present a general classification of the different types of marriages and examine their presence in the corpus. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the different parenting styles that fathers and mothers may exert when educating their children: the authoritarian style, the democratic style, the indifferent or uninvolved



style, the permissive or indulgent style, and the mixed style. Furthermore, this chapter introduces all the novels and their main themes, along with the concepts of roles and family subsystems that shall be studied in more detail in the next chapters, such as the patriarchal obligations of the nuclear family that subordinate women and empower men.

The third chapter, "Mothers," explores the subordinated position into which mothers have been forced within the traditional family circle. The chapter's departure point is the division between motherhood as a natural, individual experience linked to the body, and motherhood as a social institution mediated by patriarchy, which expects an exclusive dedication of mothers to their children, and their submission within the family circle. This is followed by the study of how the bond between these two enactments of motherhood is distorted in the corpus, especially in *Wonderland*, with terrible consequences for the sense of identity of the characters involved in these relationships, which in this case are complicated by the exertion of psychological violence in the wife-husband subsystem. The distortions affecting the role of mothers are experienced from pregnancy into childbirth, as the discussion of *Wonderland* and *Garden* proves. Besides, these alterations have an effect over the way in which society perceives children's legitimacy, as seen in *Garden*. The discussion of this novel also insists on a central issue in the corpus, the characters' fight for autonomy and control. In this sense, the analysis of the access to power of the female characters shows an evolution in Oates's fiction. In her early novels, women did not, or could not, claim power for themselves but only indirectly, often by means of a male family member such as a husband or a son. This tendency is diluted as these women increasingly start to claim power in a direct manner in later novels. This claim for power and control is immediately related to the female characters' participation in the labor market, thus the next section of the chapter deals with this aspect, and offers, first, a brief account of the major changes related to women's involvement in the labor market, and afterward, it focuses on the confluence of the productive and reproductive universes for women. This is exemplified in the light of *Bird* and *Expensive*, which further illustrate the often-conflictive

interpretation of the dichotomy between creativity and procreativity resulting in the confinement of mothers into the procreative realm, while the creative realm is either vetoed or restricted for them. Next, we introduce the question of abortion along with the historical evolution that it underwent in the United States. Since none of the characters of our corpus has an abortion performed, but only consider having one (Nada in *Expensive* and Helene in *Wonderland*), we resort to Oates's novel *Son of the Morning* (1978) to complete the discussion and to prove how patriarchy has tried to appropriate women's control over their bodies in this sense. The final sections deal with mother-child relations. Specifically, mother-daughter relationships in *Mulvaney*s and *Carthage* are used to describe positive balanced bonds, while the novels *Garden, them, Wonderland* and *Bird* serve as examples of more disturbed bonds. In general, the section highlights the destructive effects that the distortions in the enactment of motherhood have over the daughters, who seem to inherit their mothers' traumas and insecurities about their bodies, their futures and their relations to others. In the course of this study, it is noticed that in Oates's fiction, daughters have gradually come to revalue their previously unnoticed or blatantly despised mothers. In contrast, in the section devoted to mother-son relationships, we detect a patent wish on the part of the sons to possess and control their mothers, as seen, particularly, in *Expensive*, a novel which is compared to *Garden* due to the presence of a particular type of Oedipal bond in both of them. Besides, both novels end with a suicide (in *Expensive*, the protagonist expresses his intention of killing himself), an event that shall be examined too. In *Expensive* we also find examples of role reversal, in this case caused by a controlling son who tries to behave as a parent instead of a child. Role reversal is a common phenomenon in the corpus. Similar to the evolution of mother-daughter relations, Oates's fiction shows a development by which sons seem to gradually learn to respect their mothers' identity and independence.

The fourth chapter, "Fathers," is inaugurated by presenting parallel theoretical considerations to the previous chapter on mothers, namely, the distinction of fatherhood as a biological and as a social experience. In Oates, we find fathers who are obsessed with maintaining their traditional role as the heads, protectors, and breadwinners of the family,

within an absolutely rigid family structure that leaves no room for transformation. Thus, when the circumstances around these men are altered due to changes in the family structure or within the status of the individual members of the family, they are utterly unable to assume them, and usually resort to psychological or physical violence. This is complemented by presenting the role of the good provider, that is, the breadwinner, which is pervasive in the entire corpus. Next, the analysis of the father-daughter subsystem reveals that the corpus places a great emphasis on the relation of these men to their adolescent daughters, because adolescence is a phase of transformation to which these fathers are unable to adapt, as seen in *Garden, them, Mulvaney's, Bird* and *Wonderland*. These relations are most of the times initially presented as placid and affective: in fact, the intensity of the bond is at times even excessive to the extent that it seems to verge on incest, as in the case of *Bird*, in which there is an undeniable role confusion. In these novels, the fathers, enraged about the increasing demand for independence of their daughters, or by their shifting conditions (exemplified by the daughter's rape in *Mulvaney's*), eventually react in a violent manner: in *Garden* and *them*, the father figures physically assault their daughters; in *Mulvaney's*, the daughter is expelled from the house; in *Bird*, she is briefly abducted by her father; and in *Wonderland*, the daughter dies as an indirect result of her father's control over her. Besides, the discussion of *Mulvaney's* also raises questions of loss and the overcoming of trauma which are profoundly examined. Subsequently, the father-sons relation is analyzed focusing on the father's emotional distance in *them* and *Expensive*. The fathers from these novels are at the opposite ends of the breadwinner role: while in *them*, the father is unemployed, in *Expensive*, he is a successful businessman. But in any case, their relationship with their sons is similarly cool and detached. Finally, *Mulvaney's* is highlighted as a turning point in Oates's fiction because it depicts the beginning of the decay of fathers' authority over the family.

The fifth chapter, "Children," deals with the adolescent period of the daughters and sons of the family, which is one of the phases of life that has more intensely appealed to Oates. Besides, it is a period of enormous transformations that are usually challenging for the rigid structure of the patriarchal nuclear family. The chapter analyzes the

supposedly nurturing relations which are aimed at facilitating children's identity development at the core of families, in this case, patriarchal nuclear families. This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first one, adolescence is defined as a somewhat recent concept derived from the transformation of the life stages in America. Next, adolescence is analyzed as a developmental process as well as a liminal stage of life between childhood and adulthood, in which the family's adjustment and communication with the teenager are central. There is also a section dedicated to those Oatesian characters who run away from home due to their discordant vision with the world of their parents. All these questions are exemplified by using the entire corpus. The second section of this chapter goes on to explore how identity is developed within the context of the family, focusing thus on the formation of the self and its relation to the Other, which are analyzed in *Carthage* and *Wonderland*. *Carthage*, apart from focusing on the sisters' subsystem and the influence of psychological violence over it, presents a young character who is extremely influenced by her family and who needs to negotiate her sense of self and agency in order to attain a more balanced identity. Besides, loss is analyzed as one of the main consequences of the girl's disappearance for her and her family. In *Wonderland*, we examine the complicated process by which the protagonist conforms his identity by imitating a series of father figures from which he inherits a self-absorbed ego and a thirst for control that become detrimental for both his and his own family's future. The third section deals with siblings and examines this subsystem by focusing on questions such as competition and cooperation, which are exemplified by resorting to the sibling subsystem in *them*. This part includes the analysis of the Detroit riots from 1967, which have a definitive impact in the lives of the two siblings, Maureen and Jules.

Finally, the sixth chapter, "Conclusions," is composed by a final reflection on the results of this study. The PhD concludes with an appendix which includes a summary of the plots of the novels from the corpus.

An interdisciplinary theoretical framework has been considered the most appropriate approach to analyze family relations in the seven novels that constitute the main corpus of study. Taking into account that

the family and family roles constitute the focus of our analysis, the insights provided by gender studies have been especially inspiring, including both studies on women and on masculinities. The works on gender most frequently consulted for this study are Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1991), which has provided the bases for our approach to motherhood by means of its classification of motherhood as experience and the motherhood as institution; Brannon's *Gender. Psychological Perspectives* (2005), which presents a review of gender expectations and a critical revision of traditional Freudian postulates such as "penis envy," while at the same time offering alternative perspectives such as Karen Horney's "womb envy," or Karen Kaschak's interpretation of the Oedipal complex; *Madres autónomas, mujeres automáticas* (2004) by María Lozano Estivalis, which focuses on the new technologies of reproduction and their effects, and provides an account of how patriarchy is established; Elizabeth Badinter's *XY. La identidad masculina* (1993), which suggests models of male identity which are more constructive than the patriarchal ones, and offers a definition of the Law of the Father; the article "Men, Fathers and the State: National and Global Relations" (2002) by Jeff Hearn, which considers hegemonic masculinity; Vivien Burr's *Gender and Social Psychology* (1998), which offers a definition for misogyny and patriarchy; and finally, two works by R. W. Connell, who offers an insight on men and violence, hegemony and gender practices in *Masculinities* (2005), and who reflects about men, work and the body in his article "Masculinities and Men's Health" (2001).

Within the theoretical context provided by gender studies, we have focused more specifically on kinship studies, which have provided us with interesting notions on general concepts about the family, the types of families and the nuclear family. In combination with role theory, kinship studies have contributed to the classification and analysis of the different family roles (parents, mothers, fathers and adolescents). Next, studies on violence have been used to examine physical child abuse, psychological violence, emotional neglect, bullying and sexual violence. Trauma studies have also been employed as the framework to approach to the experience of loss. Studies on identity were

subsequently employed along with a series of works of reference in the fields of philosophy, social science, language acquisition theories, history and criticism on Oates. Finally, Oates's own works of fiction and non-fiction, along with some interviews, were a useful source of information.

Kinship studies have provided definitions of families, especially David White and Anne Woollett's *Families. A Context for Development* (1992), which uses the framework of developmental psychology to study individual developments within the family and their biological, social, emotional and cognitive processes. The book identifies the diverse family forms which have contributed to our definition of the term. Besides, it deals with the structure of contemporary family relationships, and proves how each member influences the evolution of the rest of the members of the family, that is, it examines how parents influence children, and how children influence parents' behavior and their view of themselves. The book also presents a detailed account of how motherhood, fatherhood and adolescence are approached and enacted. White and Woollett's theories have been valuable for the elaboration of all the chapters of our study. Other definitions of family were taken from Brenda K. Bryant and Kristine A. DeMorris's "Beyond Parent-Child Relationships: Potential Links Between Family Environments and Peer Relations" (1992), Maggie Wykes and Kirsty Welsh's *Violence, Gender and Justice* (2009), Mark Hutter's "Multicultural Perspectives" (1997), José Antonio Ríos González's *Crisis familiares: Causas y repercusiones* (1983), Charles F. Figley's introduction to his edited volume *Burnout in Families. The Systemic Costs of Caring* (1998), Carl Solomon's *Lejos del árbol. Historias de padres e hijos que han aprendido a quererse* (2014), Jesús Palacios González's *La familia como contexto de desarrollo humano* (1990), Gonzalo Musitu and Juan Herrero's "La familia: Formas y funciones" (1994), Sharon Hays's *Las contradicciones culturales de la maternidad* (1998), and N. Ray Hiner's "'Look into Families': The New History of Children and the Family and Its Implications for Educational Research" (1989).

The historical evolution of the family has been analyzed, among others, by David White and Anne Woollett; Steve Mintz's "The Family

as Educator: Historical Trends in Socialization and the Transmission of Content Within Home” (1989) and “New Rules: Postwar Families (1955-Present)” (1997); Manuela Ruiz Pardos’s “Representing the Nuclear Family in the Nuclear Age: Identity and Fatherhood in *The Seven Year Itch*” (2007); Barbara Hobson and David Morgan’s *Making Men into Fathers. Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood* (2002), which is a research volume focused on men as gendered subjects, the reevaluation of fatherhood, and the role of men in institutional settings. Apart from this, the nuclear family has been described by consulting Adrienne Rich; Christine Everingham’s *Maternidad: autonomía y dependencia* (1997), where the author vindicates a perspective on motherhood based on the independence of women; Brannon, who offers a detailed account of how gender and sexual identity are experienced from a social, cultural, biological and psychological perspective that we have applied to illustrate mother’s relationships with their bodies, and with their daughters and sons; as well as Maurice A. Lee and Carmen Flys Junquera’s “Family Reflections” (2007); Kathleen Gough’s “El origen de la familia” and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “La familia” (both from 1995); apart from Maggie Wykes and Kirsty Welsh, and Gonzalo Musitu and Juan Herrero. Finally, our analysis on the types of families is based on works by Rich; as well as S. Richard Sauber, Luciano L’Abate, Gerald Weeks and William L. Buchanan’s *The Dictionary of Family Psychology and Family Therapy* (1993), and White and Woollett, apart from David Levinson’s “Family Violence in Cross-Cultural Perspective” (1988). Family roles are defined by resorting to S. Richard Sauber, Luciano L’Abate, Gerald Weeks and William L. Buchanan; Mark Hutter’s “General Relationships;” José Antonio Ríos González; and Brenda K. Bryant and Kristine A. DeMorris.

Next, kinship studies have been used to analyze parents, mothers, fathers and adolescents. First, for examining parents we have selected the work by David White and Anne Woollett, which illustrates the different kinds of parenting styles following the theories of Baumrind, as well as their effects on children and parents; Gary W. Ladd’s “Themes and Theories: Perspectives on Processes in Family-Peer Relationships” (1992), which deals with parenting, particularly, from

the perspective of the theories of Maccoby and Martin; Jesús Palacios González, who offers a psychological perspective to analyze the family, which has been applied to the study of parenting styles; Francesca Cancian as presented in the work by Linda Brannon has provided a classification of marriage patterns; Susan Cohen and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein's "The War over the Family Is not over the Family" (1997), which deals with new models of parenting; Mark Hutter's "Multicultural Perspectives," which offers a clear description of the different models of parenting styles and José Antonio Ríos González, who provides a perspective on education and paternal authority. Finally, Wilma Binda and Franca Crippa's "Parental Self-Efficacy and Characteristics of Mother and Father in the Transition to Parenthood" (2000) presents a longitudinal study examining how couples deal with the transition to parenthood, exploring the interconnections between beliefs, knowledge and behavior of parents toward their children.

For the analysis of motherhood we have resorted to David White and Anne Woollett, who describe the experience of motherhood (specifically, pregnancy); and Sharon Hays, who presents the concept of "intensive mothering," a mode of parenting that dedicates all time and resources to the child, considering that the biological mother is the only suitable caretaker for her/him and that working outside the house is detrimental for the child; Lia Cigarini's "Genealogías femininas, el simbólico patas arriba" (sic) (2010), an article centered on working mothers, which also explores the bond between mothers and daughters; and finally, *La maternidad hoy: Claves y encrucijada* (2005) by Consuelo Paterna and Carmen Martínez, which deals with the construction of motherhood as a role and which we have used to discuss the issue of mothers and sexuality. The feminist approaches to psychoanalysis by Luce Irigaray, compiled in *The Irigaray Reader* (1997), have been used to address the social configuration of motherhood, the female body, and mother-daughter relationships; and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories on the configuration of the signifying process of language, particularly, the so-called semiotic phase (compiled in *The Kristeva Reader*, 1987) are applied to the study of motherhood in order to understand the role of the instincts. The information from Kristeva's texts has been complemented by the



introduction to the same book written by Toril Moi, as well as by articles by Kelly Oliver (“Kristeva and Feminism,” 2018) and Tina Chanter (“Kristeva and Feminism. Kristeva, Julia (1941–),” 1998). Additionally, the theme of abortion, its history in the United States and its social repercussions are dealt with in Rich, Katha Pollitt’s “Abortion in American History” (1997), Jessica Ravitz’s “The Surprising History of Abortion in the United States” (2016) and in the online resource “History of Abortion in the U.S.” (2016).

The theoretical framework for fatherhood has been provided by David White and Anne Woollett, who discuss fathers’ relationships to children and expectations over fatherhood; Jesse Bernard’s “The Good-Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall” (1997), which introduces the role of the “good-provider,” a father/husband and head of a family whose main aim is to provide for his family; Shmuel Shulman and Inge Seiffge-Krenke, who in *Fathers and Adolescents. Developmental and Clinical Perspectives* (1997), discuss as well the role of the breadwinner, along with the question of men and childrearing, and property in men and women’s relations that have been applied in the analysis of *Garden and Mulvaney*s; Haya Stier and Marta Tienda’s “Are Men Marginal to the Family? Insights from Chicago’s Inner City” (2007), which explores the ways in which fatherhood has been enacted, and the role of fathers as providers for their families; and the introduction to their edited volume *Making Men into Fathers. Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*, where Barbara Hobson and David Morgan reflect upon the biological and sociological aspects of fatherhood, which serve as the basic definition for our chapter on the topic, completed by Jeff Hearn’s article, which explores the concept of the institution of fatherhood as a power infusion mechanism for men and compares it to the institution of motherhood, which subordinates women.

Adolescents have been described in the light of John W. Santrock’s *Adolescence* (2001), which contains a detailed account of this life stage; Eugenia Scabini’s “New Aspects of Family Relations” (2000), which draws a relational and intergenerational approach based on analyses of exchanges between two generations (parents and adult children), asserting the appearance of adolescence, a life stage between childhood

and adulthood which has been central to our chapter on this topic; Leroy D. Travis's "Adolescentology: Youth, their Needs, and the Professions at the Turn of the Century," (2000) which explores the position of adolescents in the twentieth century; Margherita Lanz's "From Adolescence to Young Adulthood: A Family Transition" (2000), which considers adolescence as a joint developmental enterprise between parents and offspring, characterized by transformation as well as continuity, and has provided definitions of adolescence; and finally, David White and Anne Woollett, who describe adolescence as a liminal state, and examine adolescents' relation to their parents, and siblings relationships. The transformations of puberty are also explored in Shmuel Shulman and Inge Seiffge-Krenke's *Fathers and Adolescents. Developmental and Clinical Perspectives*. Brenda K. Bryant and Kristine A. DeMorris have also provided information about the interactions of siblings and peers.

Apart from kinship studies, studies on violence have also offered a valuable theoretical background for our analysis of Oates's novels. General definitions of violence have been taken from Felicity De Zulueta's *From Pain to Violence. The Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness* (2006), Robert T. Ammerman and Michel Hersen's "Current Issues in the Assessment of Family Violence: An Update" (1999), Lisa Aronson Fontes and Kathy A. McCloskey's "Cultural issues in Violence Against Women" (2011) and *Family Violence Across the Lifespan* by Ola W. Barnett, Cindy L. Miller-Perrin and Robin D. Perrin (1997), a comprehensive study that covers most types of family violence. It includes case studies as well as interviews with experts in psychology, sociology, criminology, and social welfare and represents a very straightforward starting point to introduce the question of psychological maltreatment, physical child abuse, and rape. They open their book by introducing the crucial realization that violence is often hidden behind the privacy of the family unit.

More specific types of violence have also been addressed. Joel S. Milner and Julie L. Crouch's "Child Physical Abuse: Theory and Research" (1999) and Brenda Jones Harden and Sally A. Koblinsky's "Double Exposure: Children affected by Family and Community Violence" (1999) deal with physical child abuse: the latter emphasizes

how this question has been often ignored. David J. Hansen, Georganna Sedlar and Jody E. Warner-Rogers's "Child Physical Abuse" (1999) has provided a working definition for physical child abuse, which has been completed by the article by Brenda Jones Harden and Sally A. Koblinsky; and Raymond H. Jr. Starr's "Physical Abuse of Children" (1988). Felicity De Zulueta also addresses physical child abuse, in her case from a neuropsychological perspective.

Next, Kathleen C. Basile and Michele C. Black's "Intimate Partner Violence Against Women" (2011) offers an insight on psychological violence against women employed to discuss its occurrence in *Wonderland*, which was complemented with Richard M. Tolman, Daniel Rosen and Gillian Cara Wood's "Psychological Maltreatment of Women" (1999). Subsequently, the article "Child Neglect" by Ronit M. Gershater-Molko and John R. Lutzker (1999) has been consulted to provide a theoretical background for instances of emotional neglect in *Expensive* and *Wonderland*, and to give a more precise definition for physical child abuse; and Gordon MacNeil's article "School Bullying: An Overview" (2002) has been especially enlightening to introduce the question of bullying in *Bird*.

Sexual violence in *Mulvaneys* has been studied with the assistance of works like Samantha Gluck's "What is Date Rape, Acquaintance Rape?" (2014), Anne Phillips's *Our Bodies, Whose Property?* (2013), and Ronet Bachman's "Epidemiology of Intimate Partner Violence and Other Family Violence Involving Adults" (1999), which provided some definitory traits. Online articles such as "Effects of Sexual Assault" (2009) and "Emotional and Psychological Impact of Rape" (2008) have been especially helpful to analyze the consequences of rape. Finally, Antoon A. Leenaars's paper "Rick: A Suicide of a Young Adult" (1997) uses a case study to examine suicide and suicide attempts, also analyzed in Colin Pritchard's *Suicide-The Ultimate Rejection? A Psycho-Social Study* (1999).

Trauma studies were scrutinized by resorting to Eric D. Miller and Julie Omarzu's "New Directions in Loss Research" (1998), Margaret Stroebe, Hank Schut and Wolfgang Stroebe's "Trauma and Grief: A Comparative Analysis" (1998) and Suzanne C. Thompson's "Blockades to Finding Meaning and Control" (1998); Colin Murray

Parkes's *Bereavement. Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (1987) offers definitions and effects of loss and the implications of trauma, which have been employed in the analysis of *Mulvaney's* and *Carthage*; equally helpful has been the classification that Tizón makes of the types of loss as presented in Leila Nomen Martín's *El duelo y la muerte. El tratamiento de la pérdida* (2007). Additionally, the psychoanalytic work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's in *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), derived from Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (2010), also referenced, explains the concepts of incorporation and introjection which we have applied to our approach to loss.

The most widely used contribution to our study of identity has been Jack Martin, Jeff H. Sugarman and Sarah Hickinbottom's *Persons: Understanding Psychological Selfhood and Agency* (2009), which explores theories on the mind, behavior, agency and self to explain human's ability to make choices. Identity has also been explored in the light of Julia Kristeva's approach to the signifying process; particularly, her conception of the symbolic phase (interpreted as the realm of patriarchal power) has been applied to the study of the personality development in *Wonderland*. Besides, we have consulted the works by Maggie Wykes and Kirsty Welsh, and José Antonio Ríos González; as well as Lauren Snider's "Toward Safer Societies. Punishment, Masculinities, and Violence Against Women" (2009), which provides an insightful vision of masculinities as well as the different constrictions that men face when constructing their identities. In the same book, Barbara Arrighi discusses similar themes in her article "The Unruly Woman. Gender and the Genres of Laughter" (2007) which offers as well a definition of misogyny.

Some other works from various disciplines were needed to explore the plots and meanings of the novels in a profound manner. In *Wonderland* there are references to the behaviorist theories of Skinner exposed in "B. F. Skinner (1904 - 1990)" (1999) by Louis Smith; and to the philosophy of Carl Jung, illustrated by Sherry Salman's "La psique creativa: principales aportaciones de Jung," Claire Douglas's "El contexto histórico de la psicología analítica" and Elio J. Frattarolli's "Mi ánima y yo: a través del oscuro espejo de la interfaz

jungiana/freudiana” (all of them from *Introducción a Jung*, 1999) as well as Frieda Fordham’s *Introducción a la psicología de Jung* (1970). Moreover, this novel has been read in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of monologism, as described in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov* (1994). In them, the Myth of the Frontier is explained by resorting to Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1998). Eva Boesenberg’s *Money and Gender in the American Novel, 1850-2000* (2010) analyzes the role of money and hegemonic gender impositions in *Expensive*. Besides, the image of the double in literature, which is recurrent in Oates, has been defined taking Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz’s *Literary terms: A Dictionary* (1993) as a reference. Roy F. Baumeister’s *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (1997) is a treaty about evil within the framework of social science, a discipline concerned with human behavior in its social and cultural aspects. It has provided an enlightening definition of sadism and clarified its links to psychological violence. The information about the process of language acquisition, employed to illustrate the identity development of a character in *Wonderland*, has been found in Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct. How the Mind Creates Language* (1994) and David Crystal’s *Child Language, Learning and Linguistics. An Overview for the Teaching and Therapeutic Professions* (1987).

Historical information has been mainly provided by John A. Garraty’s *The American Nation. A History of the United States* (1995). More specifically, the Detroit riots have been contextualized with the assistance of Slotkin, Bill McGraw’s “A Quick Guide to the 1967 Detroit Riot” (2017), Jeanne Theoharis’s “The Northern Promised Land that Wasn’t: Rosa Parks and the Black Freedom Struggle in Detroit” (2012), among others; and the counterculture movements of the 1960s have been described resorting to the information provided by Noam Chomsky’s *Imperial Ambitions. Conversations with Noam Chomsky on the Post-9/11 World. Interviews with David Barsamian* (2006). For the analysis of the conditions of life in the Great Depression, the online article “Impact of the Great Depression on Family and Home” (2004, no author) has been especially inspiring.

Literary criticism on Oates has been extensively used resorting to a wide variety of authors with diverse views on Oates's career. Brenda Daly's *Lavish Self-Divisions. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (1996) has been repeatedly referenced in our study due to its emphasis on family bonds (in particular, parent-child bonds), and gender inequality and power relations among the characters. Daly argues that in Oates's early novels, the daughter is subjected to the authority of the father, unable to claim power on her own name, a question we have highlighted in *Garden, Wonderland* and *Expensive*. This tendency starts to change in the 1980s, when more empowered female characters start to form alliances with their culturally devalued mothers. Daly also examines human self-centeredness and the belief in an omnipotent ego that some characters exhibit. Besides, she places all these episodes into American social and historical context.

As Creighton (*Novels Middle* 107, 109) emphasizes, G. F. Waller's *Dreaming America. Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (1979) and Ellen G. Friedman's *Joyce Carol Oates* (1980) place Oates's work in a similar context, formed by the idealism of American culture, the classical American concepts of freedom and self-sufficiency, and the quest for overcoming human limitations and confinements. However, their interpretation of the meaning of this quest is opposed: Waller argues that Oates's work defends the possibility of transcendence, whereas Friedman affirms that her work deals with the necessity of limitations. Waller thinks that Oates provides a celebration of the human potential for unpredictability, while Friedman assures that her characters are overreachers and solipsistic dreamers with bloated egos who try to gain control of the world around them; an attempt that eventually becomes destructive for themselves. Mary Kathryn Grant's *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates* (1978), as Creighton highlights (*Novels Middle* 107), stands in an intermediate position between Waller's and Friedman's interpretation of Oates: thus Grant admits that Oates's work describes human limitations, but also presents the possibility of transcendence (*Novels Middle* 107). Moreover, Creighton's collaboration with Kori A. Binette in "'What Does It Mean to Be a Woman?': The Daughter's Story in Oates's Novels" (2006), explores mother-daughter bond in Oates.

Waller has also provided insights on violence, and the connection of the characters with the community in *Garden*, and father-daughter relationships and the development of the self in *them* and *Wonderland*, contributing as well to the analysis of the relation between fiction and reality in *Expensive*. Friedman's book has been extremely inspiring not only to portray the mentioned megalomaniac characters, but also to illustrate female experiences such as motherhood and mother-child relationships, pregnancy or sexuality in *Garden*, *Wonderland* and *Expensive*; as well as father-daughter bonds in *Wonderland* and siblings' bonds in *them*. Alternatively, Friedman analyses the characters' often distorted relationship with food at a literal and metaphorical level in *Expensive* and *Wonderland*. Besides, Friedman provides an exceptional reading of the characters in *Wonderland* from the point of view of a series of philosophies that are emblematic of certain periods of American life, such as nihilism, solipsism, behaviorism, etc. Therefore, Friedman also supplies a clear vision of the American socio-historical context, which holds a crucial position in the corpus, namely, the devastating consequences of the Great Depression in *Garden*. Friedman's article "Feminism, Masculinity, and Nation in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction" (2006) presents a precise description of Oatesian gender representations which have contributed to elucidate the enactments of masculinity in her work. The article also depicts the transformations of the family in Oates's career.

Joanne V. Creighton's *Joyce Carol Oates. Novels of the Middle Years* (1992) covers the fifteen novels written by Oates between 1977 and 1990. This study is particularly insightful, especially taking into account that Oates herself revised the first draft. Creighton's perspective on Oates's work is also placed in an intermediate ground between Waller and Friedman: like Friedman, she identifies some Oatesian characters as overreachers, but she argues that not all their attempts to reach transcendence are deluded, that not all of their aspirations or cunning behaviors are flawed. In the present work, we defend the same intermediate view as Creighton: characters are depicted as extremely limited by their environments, family, gender and violence, but they generally manage to find wholeness in their quests (like Arlette from *Carthage*), or at least, a deeper self-understanding (as

Jesse from *Wonderland*). Creighton's *Joyce Carol Oates* (1979) analyzes Oatesian novels and short stories written before 1977, and has also been briefly referenced to complete the analysis of the characters' development in the corpus.

Three different volumes from Greg Johnson, one of Oates's most notorious biographers, have been used for this study: *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* (1987), *Joyce Carol Oates. A Study of the Short Fiction* (1994) and *Invisible Writer. A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (1998). *A Study of Short Fiction* reviews eight of her most representative short story collections, and has been referenced very specifically in our study to reinforce the analysis of our corpus with allusions to Oates's brilliant short stories. *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* meticulously analyzes Oates's fiction, emphasizing her representations of gender constrictions, social struggle, materialism, consumerism and capitalist competition, the American dream in *Garden* and *Expensive*, and the search for control in *Expensive* and *Wonderland* as well as the construction of personality in the corpus. Finally, *Invisible Writer* combines a biographical approach to Oates's life with a detailed analysis of her fiction, from which we have drawn a theoretical base to illustrate issues of gender constrictions in *them*, and sexual abuse, food, and food-related health problems in *Mulvaney's*, as well as the historical background of the Detroit riots from 1967 in *them*.

Eileen Teper Bender's *Joyce Carol Oates. Artist in Residence* (1987) has served as a strong theoretical support for all our chapters. It deals with issues of female self-definition and sexuality in *Wonderland*, the search for power in *Expensive*, the centrality of food and the dichotomy fiction versus reality in *Expensive* and *them*, as well as relevant concepts for *Wonderland* like homeostasis and equilibrium and the relationship between the brain and the mind. Besides, she emphasizes the role of names as the origin of the self and the providers of a sense of belonging in *Wonderland* and *Garden*, as well as the theme of split personalities in *Garden*. Gavin Cologne-Brookes's *Dark Eyes on America. The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (2005) analyzes social struggle in *Garden* along with the pull and rejection of capitalism and materialism, and the characters who exhibit a sexually predatory attitude in *Mulvaney's*. In "Written Interviews and a Conversation with



Joyce Carol Oates” (2006), the interviewer Cologne-Brookes makes a fitting interpretation of the significance of running away from home in Oates’s work.

Finally, Oates’s interviews, articles and essays have also been essential to understand her works from a closer and more accurate perspective. Some of the most recurrently used have been the memoir *The Lost Landscape* (2015), the collection of essays *(Woman) Writer. Occasions and Opportunities* (1989), apart from the pieces “New Heaven and Earth” (1972) and “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?” (1981), and the interviews “Transformation of Self: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates” (1989), “Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates” (2003) and “Focus on Joyce Carol Oates” (2003). Other works by Oates have been thoroughly read and analyzed in order to provide more solid arguments to reinforce our proposals. Some of the most commonly used are the stories from the collections *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (1970) and *The Goddess and Other Women* (1974), and the novels *Do with Me What You Will* (1973) and *Son of the Morning* (1978).



# 1 PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

This chapter introduces some preliminary information which has been considered pertinent for the analysis of the corpus. This introductory information has been organized in two subsections: the first is focused on Joyce Carol Oates's career and main ideas, and the second one is centered on the fundamental concepts that we shall use in our study regarding family, family roles and violence.

## 1.1 JOYCE CAROL OATES'S LITERARY CAREER

Joyce Carol Oates<sup>3</sup> was born on June 16th 1938 in Lockport, New York. Oates has often stated her admiration for the harsh lives of her parents Carolina and Frederic, who had married during the worst years of the Great Depression: "Difficult not to feel unworthy of such parents, who'd come of age as young adults in the Great Depression. Their lives were work. Their lives were deprivation. Their lives have led to *you*" (*The Lost Landscape*<sup>4</sup> 83, emphasis in the original). As a child, she lived with her parents and her maternal grandparents in the latter's Millersport farm, in Lockport, Erie County. This western New York rural area, along with Lockport and Buffalo, becomes "Eden County" in Oates's fiction, as seen, for instance, in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*. Oates describes Eden County as "somewhat surreal/lyrically rendered rural America" ("Afterword" *Garden* 2006, 402). Her family was very poor, but Oates had no consciousness of being deprived, since it was a

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<sup>3</sup> The biographical information from Oates's life has been extracted from the following sources: Bloom (143-145), Bender (47), Cologne-Brookes (*Dark Eyes* 19, 215, 218; and "Strange Case" 304, 306-312); Creighton (Novels Middle xii-xv, 2, 57, 105), Daly (X, 73-75, 112), Grant (138), Johnson (*Invisible* xviii, xix, 6, 24-25, 28, 30, 32, 37, 58, 71, 81, 84, 87-90, 97, 102-103, 135, 136, 146-147, 149, 151, 159, 164, 167, 203, 206, 209, 215, 232, 251, 272, 277, 285, 287, 292-293, 295, 309, 311-313, 317, 321, 341, 346, 363, 367-368, 373); *Understanding* 4, 16-17, 202 and *Short Fiction* 38); Oates (*Lost* 31, 62-65, 81, 138, 160, 163-165, 184, 188, 196, 213, 216, 218, 239-240, 260-262, 275, 311 and "Written Interviews" 548, 555); Showalter ("Joyce Portrait" 140) and Waller (*Dreaming* 2).

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Lost*.

common situation in that region. She was very close to her paternal grandmother Blanche, who gave Oates her first typewriter, as well as Lewis Carroll's books *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), which exerted a powerful influence over her.

Although Oates has a five years younger brother, Fred Junior (nicknamed Robin), born in 1943, as children they shared very few interests, so that her childhood was rather lonely. Oates also has a sister, Lynn Ann, born in 1956, precisely on Oates's eighteenth birthday, June 16<sup>th</sup>. Being severely autistic, she had to be admitted in a therapeutic health facility in Buffalo at fifteen years old when her parents could no longer take care of her due to her increasingly aggressive behavior. She was eventually placed in a group home with other patients. Lynn Ann has contributed to Oates's fascination with twins and doubles: "That Lynn was born on my birthday, resembles me, and has never spoken a coherent sentence while I am blessed/damned as 'prolific' had not escaped my awareness and my sense of irony," she commented (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 89). In the 1980s, she wrote two poems about Lynn Ann, "Mute Mad Child" and "Autistic Child, No Longer Child." Oates went on to explore her attraction for twins and other manifestations of divided selves in short stories like "Heat" and "Twins" from the collection *Heat and Other Stories* (1991); as well as her novels written under the pseudonym of Rosamond Smith, such as *Lives of the Twins* (1986), *Soul/Mate* (1989), and *Nemesis* (1990). In the corpus, we find several doppelgänger characters. At times, they are two different characters, such as Jesse/Monk in *Wonderland*. Other times, they represent two sides of the same character: Jesse/Dr. Vogel from *Wonderland*; and Aaron/Krull in *Little Bird of Heaven*.

As a child, Oates attended a single-room schoolhouse where she suffered constant bullying, which was not uncommon at the time: older children used to torment the younger ones. In time, Oates started to avoid the harassment by running as fast as she could. From an early age, then, she learnt about survival skills and coping with trauma, two key elements of her fiction:

Only by focusing upon the stupidity (and the inaccuracy)  
of such things have I been able, over the years, to draw out

the poison drop by drop; for this was an underworld, a child's world of which my parents knew nothing. Even when I and a few kids were tormented at school, our fears were disregarded by adults who simply didn't *know*. (Oates qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 28, emphasis in the original)

The quotation reveals not only the difficulties of experiencing trauma, but also what a solitary experience this process might be, as seen in the corpus. Oates also suffered sexual violence: at around nine or ten years old, she was molested by a group of boys, an episode she described during an interview:

I was not raped, but it would be considered sexual molestation today. And I couldn't go to my mother and say I was sexually harassed at school. I was threatened and ordered not to tell. However, I'll never forget it. [...] There was no consciousness then. Molested, battered children were in a category that was like limbo. There were no words, no language. If you tried to talk about it, you'd said, "I was picked on." Then there was a certain amount of hesitancy, if not actual shame, to say anything about your body, so you wouldn't want to say where you were harassed. [j] It was extremely important for me, retrospectively, to have these early experiences of being a helpless victim, because it allows me to sympathize—or compels me to sympathize—with victims. I know what it's like to be a victim, but I also know what it's like to get away and not have been damaged or scarred. (Oates "Interview" *Joyce. Conversations 1970-2006*, 158-159)

This quote accounts for her ability to place herself into the position of abused people, and reveals how the unnamed nature of sexual violence at the time made its disclosure impossible for her. The silence that surrounds sexual abuse is frequently portrayed in the corpus, particularly in *Mulvaney's*, set in the 1970s. However, in later works by Oates like *Daddy Love* (2013), settled at the beginning of the twenty-first century, child sexual abuse is much more clearly alluded to.

Joyce Carol Oates has always been an avid reader. Among her multiple literary and philosophic influences, she names Ernest Hemingway, Ambrose Bierce, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Plato, Carl Gustav Jung, H.P. Lovecraft, Jonathan Swift, Homer, Ovid, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Lewis Carroll, Friedrich Nietzsche and Herman Melville, whom she particularly admires: she considers *Moby Dick* the greatest American novel (*Lost* 234). Apart from this, Oates holds what Johnson describes as a sympathetic but detached relationship with feminist literary culture, asserting that one should not confuse propagandistic impulses with the impulses of art. Besides, she insisted that categorizing a writer according to gender is to distort the nature of her achievement, and that it implies that women should focus on specific themes. For her, that women must write about women's issues implies an ironic displacement of the old domestic impositions into a new restriction. Oates affirms that she is equally sympathetic to male and female characters, and that "a 'feminist theme' doesn't make a sentimental, weak, cliché-ridden work valuable; [juts like] a non- or even anti-feminist 'theme' doesn't make a serious work valueless, even for women" (Johnson *Short Fiction* 38, 40). However, her career proves that her interest in female characters has increased in time. Oates novels up to *Unholy Loves* (1979) are mostly focused on male characters; a trait that started to shift during the 1980s, when she started to explore women's private and political lives.

Oates has complained about the gender bias with which critics have often contemplated her work. For instance, in her 1981 article "Why Is Your Writing so Violent?," she expresses her exhaustion about being asked why she includes so much violence in her work: she attributes this insistent query to sheer ignorance and sexism. In the same article, she locates the origin of preconceptions about what women and men should write in the undying influence of psychoanalysis:

Psychoanalysis maintains that if the Oedipal aggressions of the male are a function merely of the domestic triangle, arising ineluctably out of the "family romance," so too are the female emotions—with the added embarrassment that the female is doomed to the greater imperfection of being

both non-male and presumably resentful as a consequence of this condition. Aggression, discontent, rebellious urges, a sense of injustice—these have nothing to do with the outer world, but only with the sufferer; and if the sufferer is a woman, by definition a creature characterized by envy, how is it possible to take her seriously? The territory of the female artist should be the subjective, the domestic. She is allowed to be “charming,” “amusing,” “delightful.” Her models should not be Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky but one or another woman writer. (Oates “Why Violent”)

In short, Oates vindicates her right to write upon whichever subject she wishes to, and to choose her own literary models. Curiously, Oates literary heroes were almost all men: she identifies herself with Faulkner, Balzac or Melville, as Johnson recalls (*Invisible* 308). However, as Bender adds, Oates has also described her affinity with other American women writers: like Eudora Welty, she depicts a universe in which horror can erupt out of the familiar landscape, fed by some irresistible biological force; and like Flannery O’Connor, her stories may be filtered through a grotesque or freakily precocious consciousness: cripples, misfits and fat people crowd her narratives, not God-hungry but victimized by their own internal appetites (2).

Oates’s stated wish to get rid of labels and preconceptions was perhaps the reason that moved her to write her famous quotation about being a writer without gender: “A woman who writes is a writer by her own definition, but she is a *woman* writer by other’s definitions” (qtd. in Showalter “Introduction” 7, emphasis in the original). According to Showalter, this assertion has been taken as a denial of her social identity as a woman writer; but in fact, her sense of being a (woman) writer has intensified from the 1980s, especially with novels as *Bellefleur* (1980), *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) and *Mysteries of Wintherturn* (1984), which meditate on female creativity and the female community (“Joyce Portrait” 140). In time, Creighton affirms, Oates became more realistic about how she would be inevitably perceived (as a woman writer), and about how deeply integrated in our society sexist labelling is. In her fiction and essays, she participates in feminist discourse by accepting

to assess how women are made and unmade by male definitions of womanhood (*Novels Middle* 57).

Oates studied English at Syracuse University on a New York State Regents Scholarship. In 1959, she won the Mademoiselle short story contest with her story "In the Old World," a contest that Sylvia Plath had also won in 1950. After getting a B.A. in English in 1960, she attended a graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, where she got an M. A. In October 1960, she met Raymond Smith, a PhD student on Jonathan Swift born in 1930 in Milwaukee. Oates and Smith got married in January 23, 1961, and moved to Beaumont, Texas, where they were shocked about the overt racism they witnessed there. Later on, Oates accepted an offer to work at the University of Detroit as instructor of English. The couple returned to the North in 1962 and settled in Detroit, where they would live until 1968.

Oates professional literary career began in 1967. It covers most genres: novel, short story, novella, poetry, essay, children's and young adult's fiction, theater plays and essays.<sup>5</sup> Oates's career may be divided into seven phases which we shall briefly describe.<sup>6</sup>

The first phase of Oates's career is composed by her earliest work, from around 1964 to 1967, which arose from personal feelings of alienation. In these works, she presents the fictional Eden County, dramatizing the hometown area of western New York which Oates left but from which she never got fully emotionally detached. During this period, she wrote the novels *With Shuddering Fall* (1964) and *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967). She also published the short story collections *By the North Gate* (1963) (which was her first published book) and *Upon the Sweeping Flood and Other Stories* (1966).

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<sup>5</sup> Besides, some of Oates's most celebrated works were adapted to the cinema: the two versions of *Foxfire* (Laurent Cantet, 2012; and Annette Haywood-Carter, 1996), *Zombie* (Thomas Caruso, 2010), *We Were the Mulvaney's* (Peter Werner, 2002), *Blonde* (Joyce Chopra, 2001) and *Smooth Talk* (Joyce Chopra, 1985, based on the short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been") ("Joyce Carol Oates. Filmography" n. p.).

<sup>6</sup> This classification is based on Johnson (*Invisible* 303, 371-372), Daly (XXIV, 71, 112), Cologne-Brookes (*Dark Eyes* 175 and "Strange Case" 312) and Anderson ("Review *American Martyrs*" 2-3).



The second phase became a landmark in Oates's writing career. It extends from 1968 to 1972 and was shaped by her Detroit experience. She saw Detroit as a microcosm for many problems of the American society. During the 1960s, the city had severe problems of unemployment and racism, which would culminate in the riots of 1967. This period comprises novels like *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969) and *Wonderland* (1971), which, along with the previous *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, constitute the so-called "Wonderland Quartet," described in the appendix. Oates also depicted and satirized the sterile and snobbish environment of Detroit's wealthy quarters in novels like *Expensive* and *them* and short stories like "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again," collected in *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (1970), which is one of her most significant collections, along with *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972). Despite living in a wealthy neighborhood, Oates was aware of the state of the city slums (portrayed in *them*), so that as Johnson notices, most of Oates's short stories of the 1960s deal with the extreme emotions from which her carefully structured life shielded her from (*Invisible* 167).

Moving to Detroit also influenced Oates's subject matters. Her first novels, *With Shuddering Fall* and *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, were settled in the countryside of the fictional Eden County; but from 1963 to 1976, as she asserts, much of her fiction was emotionally inspired by Detroit (Oates *Lost* 272). Indeed, the city appears, most notably, in *Expensive*, *them*, and *Do with Me What You Will* (1973). Thus, the setting of her novels became less rural and more urban, as she herself acknowledged (Oates *Lost* 272).

Oates started writing poetry in the spring of 1967. Some of her poem collections are *Women in Love* (1968), *Anonymous Sins* (1969), *Love and Its Derangements* (1970), *Angel Fire* (1973), *Dreaming America* (1973), *Women Whose Lives Are Food, Men Whose Lives Are Money* (1978), and *Tenderness* (1996). In 1968, Oates began reviewing for *The New York Times Book Review* and the *Washington Post Book World*. The same year, she received the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters for *Garden*, as well as a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant.

In 1968, Oates and Smith accepted a position to teach at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, where she was appointed assistant professor in English. The 1967 Detroit riots broke before they moved, but Oates and her husband were on a summer vacation at the time and did not suffer them, although they came close to their house. This experience would dominate Oates's imagination in the future years: she would become emotionally attached to Detroit, since the city provided the setting, the mood, and the tone and the central subject of some of her best writing, like *them* and *Do with Me What You Will*, as well as her contemporary short stories. For Oates, Detroit is a "place of romance, the quintessential American city" (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 151).

In 1970, she received the National Book Award for her novel *them*. During 1971 and 1972, Oates lived in London, England. In 1972, after the publication of *Wonderland*, Oates had a sort of "mystical experience" that led her to change the novel's ending and to eliminate the opening text from the original version that made reference to the eliminated ending. Oates describes this experience in her article "Against Nature," originally published in the magazine *Antaeus* during the Fall of 1986, and compiled in the collection of essays *Woman (Writer). Occasions and Opportunities*<sup>7</sup> in 1988:

My body is not "I" but "it." My body is not one but many. My body, which "I" inhabit, is inhabited as well by other creatures, unknown to me, imperceptible [j] the "body" [as] a tall column of light and blood heat, a temporary agreement among atoms [j] In this fantastical structure, the "I" is deluded as to its sovereignty, let alone autonomy in the (outside) world; the most astonishing secret is that the "I" doesn't exist!—but it behaves as if it does, as if it were one and not many. In any case, without the "I" the tall column of light and heat would die, and the microscopic life particles would die with it [j] The "I," which doesn't exist, is everything. (*Woman* 74-75)

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<sup>7</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Woman*.

In other words, she felt that her ego had surrendered to a larger and transcendent reality: it was an “[a]bsolute loss of ‘ego,’ selfness. [j] I realized that ‘I’ did not exist and had never existed, in the way I had always supposed” (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 206). She then experienced a complete reorganization of her psyche. Thus, by experiencing the reality of her body as something external to her, Oates was able to perceive the delusions of the ego, which she has frequently portrayed in her fiction. As Johnson reminds and Oates confirms in the prologue of his collection of essays *The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature* (1972), this change of perspective announces that tragedy stems from a break between the self and the community, and that such tragedy has fear as its base. These ideas will be analyzed in our discussion of the corpus. Her novel *Wonderland* also suggests that the isolated and existential self was part of a Western romantic tradition that she was starting to reject (*Invisible* 207).

This experience led Oates to develop a new philosophical conception, which she exposed in her essay “New Heaven and Earth,” published in 1972 in *The Saturday Review*, where she wrote that the United States was coming to a turning point in its history, which entailed the end of a certain kind of consciousness. According to her, the God-centered world of the Middle Ages had been transformed into the Renaissance era, a period which was more focused on the individual self. This caused a kind of “communal anxiety” reflected in, for example, William Shakespeare’s tragedies *King Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida* (“New” 52). At the time of writing the article, the United States became the first nation to “suffer/ enjoy the death throes of the Renaissance” (“New” 52). This transformation prompted that “suppressed voices are at last being heard, in which no extreme viewpoint is any longer ‘extreme’” (“New” 52).

The ones to dramatize and exorcize the American nightmares of the time, Oates argues, would be America’s best poets and writers: some of them were already realizing that the contemporary “isolated ego” was “helpless, unconnected with any social or cultural unit, unable to direct the flow of history, [j] [and unable to] effectively communicate. The effect is almost that of a single voice” (“New” 52-53). This Renaissance model was still powerful at the time, since

[i]t declares: *I will, I want, I demand, I think, I am*. This voice tells us that we are not quite omnipotent but must act as if we were, pushing out into a world of other people or of nature that will necessarily resist us, that will try to destroy us, and that we must conquer. I will exist has meant only I will impose my will on others. (“New” 53, emphasis in the original)

Oates argues that the next step in this evolution is entering a higher humanism in which all substance in the universe is there by equal right. She declares that we are tired of the old dichotomies such as sane/insane, normal/sick, black/white, man/nature, victor/vanquished; and, particularly, I/it. Although they had been a necessary step in our development as human beings, they were no longer useful, pragmatic, or true. Thus, Oates considers that we all belong into a collective mind in which

we share everything that is mental, most obviously language itself, and that the old boundary of the skin is no boundary at all but a membrane connecting the inner and outer experiences of existence. Our intelligence, our wit, our cleverness, our unique personalities—all are simultaneously “our own” possessions and the world’s. (“New” 53)

Oates argues that at that new era, we should be able to articulate and share our most mysterious and inexplicable experiences; instead of insisting upon rigid intellectual categories. Oates concludes that an “absolutely honest literature, whether fiction or nonfiction, must dramatize for us the complexities of this epoch, showing us how deeply related we are to one another” (“New” 54). She affirms that the transition from an I-centered self into a transcendental one should be naturally achieved by its own means and not externally forced. Oates also describes the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s as a time when a “very discordant music” was heard, composed by discordant demands, voices, stages of personality which should be brought into harmony (“New” 54), which is something that we perceive, in a subtle manner,

in *Wonderland*'s revision. Regarding her future writing career, she decided that:

I still feel my own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my time, and (hopefully) to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future. I think that art, especially prose fiction, is directly connected with culture, with society; that there is no "art for art's sake" and never was, but only art as a more conscious, formal expression of a human communal need, in which individuals seem to speak individually but are, in reality, only giving voice and form to the intangible that is in the air around them. ("New" 51-52)

As Bender notices (5), the ideas of communal consciousness are related to Carl Gustav Jung, a much-cherished influence of Oates despite the fact that she does not specifically mention him in "New." In *Wonderland*, Jung's philosophy holds a crucial position.

Oates's new perspective is clearly perceived by comparing the first three titles of the *Wonderland* Quartet (*A Garden of Earthly Delights*, *Expensive People* and *them*) with subsequent works, as Daly explains. Oates had become critical of the Renaissance ideal of the self, the imperial "I." This is a masculine concept which may have been healthy at one time; but had later on become pathological. This trilogy alerts readers of this pathology and its inherent violence, which is apparent in the wealthy patriarchs that Oates describes, like Elwood in *Expensive People*, and the absent father of Nadine in *them* (26). To these two patriarchs we could add Willard and Dr. Pedersen from *Wonderland*, since according to Daly, they all regard other people, including their children, as competitors; as they age and their fear of death intensifies, they try to swallow up all they see. This is a pathological greed that, according to Oates, our society has inherited from the Renaissance (26-27). Thus, Oates typical protagonist is blind to the possibility of "communal consciousness" that Oates perceives as a likely salvation for our culture (Johnson *Understanding* 10).

The third phase of Oates's career starts around 1972 and finishes around 1978. At the time, the women's movement experienced an

enormous growth, which is reflected in Oates's exploration of the possibilities of women-centered communities as well as individual women as agents of their own destiny, as seen in novels like *Do with Me What You Will*, *Childwold* (1976) and *Unholy Loves*. As Daly contends, (75) during this decade she wrote against male-dominated institutions; for instance, law, represented by Martin Howe in *Do with Me What You Will*; politics and philosophy by Andrew Petrie, the visual arts by Hugh Petrie and religion by Stephen Petrie in *The Assassins. A Book of Hours* (1975); literature by Fitz John Kasch in *Childwold*; fundamentalist Christian faith by Nathan Vickery and academic skepticism by Japheth Sproul in *Son of the Morning*; literary interpretation by Lewis Seidel and music by Alexei Kessler in *Unholy Loves*; and business by Edwin Locke in *Cybele* (1979). Besides, *Do with Me What You Will* shows Oates's departure from the chronological and straightforward approach of novels like *them* toward a looser narration, sometimes close to the stream of consciousness, as seen in *Expensive People* (Grant 138). Some of the most notable short story collections of the time are *The Goddess and Other Women* (1974) and *Crossing the Border* (1976). The collection of essays *New Heaven, New Earth* was published in 1974. In the Fall of that year, the first issue of the literary magazine *Ontario Review*, published by Oates and Smith, came out. They also founded The Ontario Review Press Books, which would publish much of Oates's work.

Oates was invited to teach at Princeton University during the years 1978-1979 as a writer in residence. The University of Windsor allowed Oates to take a sabbatical year, and the couple moved to Princeton. This was a major transition in Oates's life, as well as her first long move since 1962. At Princeton, Oates taught Creative Writing. She became a member of the American Academy of the Arts and Letters in 1978.

The fourth major phase of her career began precisely when Oates moved to Princeton in 1978 and extended during the 1980s. At the beginning of the 1980s, Oates published more article collections such as *Contraries* (1981) and *The Profane Art* (1983). She playfully experimented with genre and produced what she has called her "postmodernist romance" novels (Oates "Written Interviews" 548), which have also been described as Gothic: *Bellefleur*, *A Bloodsmoor*

*Romance and Mysteries of Wintherturn*. The saga was completed in following decades: in 1998 with *My Heart Laid Bare*, and in 2013 with *The Accursed*. According to Prose, Oates uses the Gothic to express her unease about the troubling aspects of human nature, about the legacies of the past and the disturbing directions in which society might be heading (30). Besides, these Gothic works are heavily focused upon the oppressed situation of women. During this decade, her short story collections include *Last Days: Stories* (1984) and *Raven's Wing: Stories* (1986).

In the fifth phase of her career, from the end of the 1980s and through the decade of the 1990s, Oates, now a professor at Princeton, returned to realism, providing multi-generational family sagas such as *We Were the Mulvaney*s and *You Must Remember This* (1987) as well as more experimental works like *Black Water* (1992), *What I Lived For* (1994) and *Zombie* (1995). She engaged again with the Gothic tradition in works such as the short story collection *Haunted. Tales of the Grotesque* (1994), and also wrote the opera libretto for the opera adaptation of her novella *Black Water*, premiered in Philadelphia. In 1987, she published *On Boxing*, a reflection upon this sport that includes, according to Creighton (*Novels Middle xi*), a study of the male as “the Other,” as well as an arena to study the dialectics of emotion and will. Oates has been fascinated with boxing since a young age, and has also written several articles upon this subject.

As Cologne-Brookes argues, during the mid-1990s, the novels *Black Water*; *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993) and *What I Lived For* explore individual and cultural maturity in the specific social spheres of politics, high school and business; whereas *We Were the Mulvaney*s, *Broke Heart Blues* (1999), *Blonde* (2000) and *Middle Age: A Romance* (2001) are preoccupied with defining mature perspectives and pinpointing the differences between those that enable and those that debilitate. *We Were the Mulvaney*s explores family life; *Broke Heart Blues* and *Middle Age: A Romance* focus on nostalgia and myth-making; and *Blonde* focuses on the quasi-religious cult to celebrity (*Dark Eyes* 115, 177).

During her sixth phase, extending from the end of the 1990s until around 2008, her fiction focused on women as victims/survivors as she

had started to examine in *We Were the Mulvaneys*; *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, *First Love* (1996); *Man Crazy* (1997); *Blonde; Beasts* (2002); *I'll Take You There* (2002); *The Tattooed Girl* (2003); *Rape: A Love Story* (2003), and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007). At this time, Oates's interest in the Gothic fashion becomes patent again, as seen in her exploration of the phenomenon of the doppelgänger in her thriller novels written under the pseudonyms Lauren Kelly (*Blood Mask*, 2006) and Rosamond Smith (*Starr Bright Will Be with You Soon*, 1999; and *The Barrens*, 2001).

In the seventh stage, from 2008 onwards, Oates has focused on the most significant political debates in the United States of the last decades, highlighting the intersections of class, politics, religion, law, and the media. And thus, *My Sister, My Love* (2008) fictionalizes the media frenzy around JonBenét Ramsey's murder case and the world of childhood stardom; *Carthage* (2014) features the Iraq War and the propaganda supporting the conflict, as well as the American penitentiary system and the death row; *The Sacrifice* (2015) fictionalizes the case of Tawana Brawley, an African-American adolescent who falsely claimed to have been raped by a group of white men in the 1980s; *A Book of American Martyrs* (2017) is centered around abortion clinics and their detractors; *The Man Without a Shadow* (2016), also based on a real case, raises questions of the mechanisms of memory and sexual misconduct at work. Oates's short stories from this period are mostly focused on the genres of horror and fantasy, as seen in the collections *The Corn Maiden and Other Nightmares* (2011), *The Doll-Master and Other Tales of Terror* (2016) and *DIS MEM BER* (2017). During this period, she also wrote her two memoirs *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (2011) and *The Lost Landscape* (2015).

In February 2008, Raymond Smith was suddenly diagnosed with pneumonia and died in about a week. This traumatic experience is reflected by Oates in *A Widow's Story*. In 2009, Oates married Charles Gross. In March 2010, President Barack Obama awarded the National Humanities Medal to Joyce Carol Oates for a lifetime of contributions to American literature.

Oates, as she admits (*Where I've Been* 373), has written most of her work in a realistic style. The exception is found in the Gothic of her



postmodernist novels and the science-fiction of some short stories and the 2018 novel *Hazards of Time Travel*. Through her realistic mode, Oates has tried to dissect and explore past and present American realities in terms of the distribution of power among institutions such as medicine, law, politics, psychiatry, religion, education, business, the military-industrial complex, and, especially, the family. As Waller comments, for Oates, “America is an experience, not a place; it is what our personalities create as well as what we are thrown into” (*Dreaming* 29). Therefore, Oates’s world entails paradox, irony and suggestion. As several critics have expressed, it is above all communal, not because it encourages a group mindset, but rather because it encourages individuals to revise their own perspectives.

In the next section, we introduce the main theoretical concepts that have served as a basis for our study. The vital experience of Joyce Carol Oates, along with many of the ideas that constitute her literary universe, have effects in the manner in which families and family members are presented in her fiction: for instance, her childhood as the daughter of parents who grew up during the Great Depression, whom she greatly admired, and the contemplation of the country’s destitute state at the time, are reflected in numerous of Oates’s plots; or the definite effect that her mystical experience had in her belief of the relevance of the communality of human experience, which influenced her decision to change the ending of *Wonderland*. Before we focus in the analysis of these aspects, it is pertinent to outline some essential concepts.

## **1.2 ESSENTIAL THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

When defining what a family is, the most commonly used criterion is the biological one, by means of which many authors have reduced the concept of family to the union of a heterosexual couple. But biological and/or heterosexual relationships are not always present in families: numerous families are composed by non-blood related members; while others are formed by a homosexual couple, or a couple without children, etc.

Thus, a biological or heterosexual definition of family is definitely incomplete, as observed by numerous authors. Bryant and DeMorris, for instance, provide a more inclusive definition, describing families as

“typically biologically defined groups of individuals who share a common household unless difficulties preclude such arrangements. Very practically, a family consists of at least one adult, generally referred to as ‘parent’ and at least one child” (159). It is important to notice their use of the adverb “typically,” which indicates that biology is not the only bond among these persons, nor is it strictly essential to the term. The authors are also careful not to mention any specific sexual inclination, or gender, in their definition, but still, they forget to mention that a childless couple, for instance, also constitutes a family. We thus conclude that families are only at times linked by biological ties.

Families are social groups that function both as private and public units, dimensions that are explored by Figley, and Bryant and DeMorris, respectively. First, Figley emphasizes the articulation of family relationships by remarking that families are composed of members who have ongoing and interdependent relationships with one another. He states that as a psychosocial system, the family exhibits, firstly, a certain structure which comprises the arrangement of roles, rules, and expectations for its members; and secondly, processes of acquiring and disseminating social supportiveness. Families are changing psychosocial systems which undergo self-correcting and self-sustaining activities in order to respond to changing demands (Figley 6). This process of transformation is widely portrayed in the corpus.

Another common aspect of families is that they are often the site where identities are developed. In this respect, Carl Salomon’s *Lejos del árbol* (2012) provides a crucial distinction between vertical and horizontal identities. According to him, the majority of children inherit some traits from their parents: these are the so-called vertical identities, the traits and values that are transmitted from parents to children not only through DNA, but also through shared cultural norms (e.g., ethnic identity). Language is also vertical, and religion is somehow vertical because parents tend to transmit their beliefs to children, but then children may be irreligious or convert to other religion. Nationality is vertical except in the case of immigrants. There are also traits that cannot be traced back to the parents because they are strange to them. They are acquired from a group of people who also share that trait: this is a horizontal identity. They can be the expression of recessive genes,

strange mutations, prenatal influences, or values and preferences that a child does not share with her/his parents (e.g., being a gay child from heterosexual parents; and usually, physical disabilities, psychopathy, genius, etc.) (Solomon 14). Ideally, there should be a balance between these two identities, but very often, there is a clash between them, as in the case of *Wonderland*.

Second, Bryant and DeMorris focus on the functions of families, arguing that

[w]hen they are working as they “are supposed to,” families share resources to secure food, clothing, household goods, transportation to places of work, school, and entertainment. In other words, families are [j ] designed to work and play together. (159)

Finally, it is obvious that families do not function in isolation. Bryant and DeMorris assert that they work within a larger social context consisting of formal and informal social structures, such as parental work place, schools, neighbors, and peer relations (159). The influence of the social environment is clearly perceived, for instance, in *Expensive* and *them*, which are placed in Detroit, in an upper-class suburb with its social gatherings and in marginalized neighborhoods where violence is common, respectively.

Having pointed out the traits that are not deemed useful when defining the family, and some traits that are much more accurate, we shall now try to find a more accurate and inclusive definition. The description of the family provided by Palacios González is partially restrictive, but also offers some comprehensive insights. Thus, although he argues that initially, a family is formed by two adults who have affective, sexual and relational bonds; he also admits that a family does not necessarily imply a marriage, or the continuous presence of both parents, or having biological children (26-27). His most illustrating contribution, however, is asserting that a family is

*la unión de personas que comparten un proyecto vital de existencia en común que se quiere duradero, en el que se generan fuertes sentimientos de pertenencia a dicho*

*grupo, existe un compromiso personal entre sus miembros y se establecen intensas relaciones de intimidad, reciprocidad y dependencia. (27, emphasis in the original)*

In this respect, families may resemble the definition that Musitu and Herrero provide of certain groups (such as communes, cooperative groups, cohabitation, etc.) which share characteristics with families. These groups can be defined as not being tied by blood and sharing a long history together as well as intimate experiences. Besides, their behaviors are driven by mutual benefit, and they show processes of problem-solving which are similar to those of the families. They exhibit traits such as harmony and love, and they are characterized by individual self-assertion which is disciplined by means of a common spirit, and constructed upon solidarity among its members instead of the exchange of specific services or benefits (Musitu and Herrero 20).

In summary, taking into account the previous reflections, we conclude that the family is a group of people not necessarily related by blood, or either, a couple of persons who have an ongoing, interdependent relationship, and who share a sense of belonging to their family unit. Ideally, the relationships in a family are lasting, and characterized by bonds of mutual affection, intimacy, reciprocity, concern, cooperation, compromise and/or solidarity. Families often share a common household. It is also usual for families to exhibit a set of roles, rules, and expectations for its members; and to be the site where individual and gendered identities are developed. Finally, families function within the larger social context of society, along with other structures such as the work place, schools, neighborhoods, communities, governments, etc.

In short, the concept of the family is a construction. According to Hays, social constructions are neither the result of individual thinking, nor are they static. Our understanding of the world depends on the interaction with people along time, in a historical process by which our culture is constantly adjusted and transformed. The social construction of culture usually implies unbalanced relationships of power. But although the ruling class has more power to institutionalize culture than other groups, they are not always able, or willing, to impose their ideas.

Besides, less powerful people might be capable of resisting imposed notions, transforming culture or creating their own subcultures (37).

As Hiner points out, the existence of the family has been continuous; but its precise shape, composition, purposes, functions and effects have been subjected to change. In this sense, the “family” does not exist. Variations in its characteristics have been enormous, and continuities are more apparent than real when particular families are examined. Ethnicity, class, gender, region, nationalism, religion, ideology, economic events, and “the times” have left their mark on American families. Family historians have identified certain basic trends and patterns that seem to have an impact on American families, such as the household structure, kinship, the relationship of the household and kin group to larger social structures and processes, life-course analysis, and the internal dynamics and the quality of family relationships (Hiner 17-18).

When considering how families are formed, we have resorted to a series of useful working concepts proposed by Ríos González (19), who conceives families as dynamic groups that are progressively formed. They are not only composed by their current members (mother, father, children, etc.), but also by the Family System of Origin of the family’s ancestors (“Sistemas Familiares de Origen”). Such a system comprises the values, myths, rites and customs, resistance to change, old traditions, and even the obsessions that have been reinforced through the years. Practically all the novels of the corpus depict and stress the relevance of the Family Systems of Origin.

From the Family System of Origin, a couple (or, in our understanding of the term family, a person) consensually constructs its “Self-Created Family System” (“Sistema Familiar Creado y Propio”) when they start a family (Ríos González 19). All the novels from the corpus describe this process of creation, except for *Carthage* and *Bird*. This system is established through negotiations, communication, defense of values that are considered important and even essential, reduction of those values considered to be obsolete, etc. Sometimes, the consensus (in cases where there is a couple, as in the case of the corpus) is reached through an open negotiation process; and other times, in an occult or hidden way.

Ríos González defines the “Desired Family System” as arising from a family’s wish for improvement and growth (“Sistema Familiar Querido o Deseado”). It searches for and adapts to new situations. There are multiple factors at work in this system, such as how a person wants to be, how she or he pays attention to what his or her partner wants to be; what someone wants to be as father/mother/son/daughter; how children develop as they grow, etc. All these roles will change according to the life cycle of the family, which is modified by biological and emotional changes, transformations of the environment, appearance of new needs, jobs and values; as well as the specific development stages of each of the members of the family (20). In *Wonderland*, Jesse is obsessed with his Desired Family System: he plans every detail of it to the extent that he is more focused on his ideal than on his actual family.

Since the corpus covers a wide temporal setting extending from the 1920s to 2012, it is necessary to consider the differences that the family has undergone through all these decades; and in doing so, examine some of the social and historical forces and influences that have altered it. The following paragraphs thus describe the evolution of the family along with the sociohistorical transformations that have a prominent presence in the corpus.

As Garraty explains, during the 1920s, more than nineteen million people moved from farms to cities in the United States. Living in a city influenced aspects such as family structure, educational opportunities, etc. Women were taking jobs attracted by the growing demand for clerks, typists, salespeople, receptionists, telephone operators etc. Most jobs were still menial, nonetheless; and their salary was smaller than that of men. Besides, less than 10% of all married women were working, as we see in *Garden*, where the female protagonist leaves her job when she gets pregnant. Middle-class married women who worked were nearly all childless or highly paid professionals who were able to employ servants at home. Most male skilled workers earned enough money to support a family in modest comfort as long as they could work steadily; but an unskilled laborer could not. Wives in such families helped out doing occasional work as laundry or sewing.

Young people at the time perceived the narrowness and conservatism of their elders as old-fashioned and ridiculous. Some of their models and leaders were the prewar Greenwich Village bohemians. These young people were eager to understand the world and make their way in it. They were more unconventional than their elders because they had to adjust to profound and rapid changes. During this decade, the conception of sex also started to change. Conservatives regretted what they considered to be a breakdown of the moral standards, the fragmentation of the family, and the decline of parental authority. Divorce laws were modified in many states. Relaxation of the rigid sexual morality did not completely change the common morality, though: the double standard still existed. In addition, couples continue to marry more because of love and physical attraction than due to social position or economic advantage, or following their parents' wishes. In each new decade, people married slightly later in life and had fewer children (Garraty 665, 692-696).

During the next decade, the 1930s, the Great Depression (1929-1939) had deep psychological implications. When people (mostly men) lost their jobs, they frantically looked for new ones, but if they were unemployed for more than a few months, they gradually became apathetic and ashamed, as seen in *Garden*, where many male characters insist on providing constant explanations for their being unemployed, since they feel they must justify their situation. This feeling explains, in part, why people did not react more radically to the economic situation, although there were protest marches and strikes. The Depression also produced a drop in the birthrate, which became the lowest rate in American history. In some cases, the Depression increased family ties: some unemployed men spend more time with their children and helped their wives with the housework. Others became impatient, refused to help at home, sulked or turned to drinking. The biological father of the protagonist from *Wonderland* is found among the latter group: he becomes an angered, frustrated and violent man. The influence of wives in families increased; and so women experienced less psychological suffering: they were too busy to turn to apathy. The Great Depression also left an indelible mark on the lives of the young. It would influence their attitudes toward the family and especially their attitude toward

economic security. Along with this, authority declined when there was less money available for the children's needs, as seen in *Garden*. Some adolescents found part-time jobs to help out, while others refused to go to school (Garraty 732-734, "Human Meaning" n. p.).

According to Garraty, World War Two (1939-1945) caused drastic changes in the configuration of families. Thousands of families moved to the centers of war production such as Detroit (as seen in *them*) or Southern California, where housing was insufficient. The cramped quarters and unstable circumstances caused a rise in crime, delinquency and prostitution. During the war, marriages and births increased sharply. Many young couples decided to marry before the bridegroom/husband went off to war, but the increase of hasty marriages followed by long separations also increased the rate of divorces.

When men went to war, a need for women workers appeared, so many of them (married and single) joined the work-force, whereas thousands of them were serving in the army. At the beginning, there was considerable male resistance to this incorporation, but these attitudes lost force as the demand for labor escalated. Women took these jobs for different reasons, apart from the economic ones: patriotism, the possibility of entering a new world, the desire for independence, etc. African-American women, experiencing double discrimination due to their race and gender, had a particularly difficult time. Few day-care facilities existed, although the government tried to establish them (Garraty 773, 777-778).

When the war finished in 1945, women were forced to surrender the jobs they had taken and to return to their traditional roles of housewives and mothers. Some women adopted these roles, as indicated by the sharp rise in marriage rates; but many others continued to work. The country faced the postwar reconversion period with outstanding ease. New suburbs were built on the edges of cities, the middle class expanded, and the demand for labor was large, although in the period between 1945 and 1947 the inflation and food prices rose, and there was a wave of strikes. The trend for early marriage seen during the war continued, and the birthrate notably increased as well, causing a baby boom. Many servicemen had idealized domesticity



while being abroad, and people sought security after the strain of the war. They faced the future with hope, encouraged by the booming economy. The divorce rate was slackened. People tended to be conformists, maybe due to the omnipresent material progress. Thus, domesticity was reaffirmed, and being childless was considered deviant and selfish: having a large family became a kind of national objective (Garraty 794-795, 853, 872). However, this arrangement was far from being generally satisfactory. As Ruiz Pardos notices, the widespread domestic revival was fostered by a wide range of discourses. This family ideology posted the home as the ultimate shelter in an increasingly hostile world and the most suitable place to indulge in the comforts that capitalism afforded (28). Such ideology is at the core of the conception of the nuclear family. However,

[b]oth in real life and in fictional representations, the postwar US family ideal was surrounded by a deep sense of suffocating restlessness and barely contained anxiety which seemed to be deeply related not just to the inner fragmentation of households but also to the position of the nuclear unit in society at large. (Ruiz Pardos 29)

The best example of the anxiety that grew in families after the war is probably seen in Oates's novel *You Must Remember This*.<sup>8</sup> Ruiz Pardos claims that the nuclear family compensated this anxiety by means of consumerism:

Evolving along with the industrial society, the modern nuclear family derived its social standing in the community precisely from its consuming power. Stripped of its historical continuity by the corporate demands of mobility, the isolated nuclear family readily clung to the ideal of affluence and spending as a means to escape the growing feelings of rootlessness plaguing it in the postwar years. (Ruiz Pardos 29)

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<sup>8</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Must*.

During the 1950s, the trend of domesticity from the previous years was still prevalent, and only 25% of married women worked outside the home. After this decade, divorce returned to its historic upward climb, childbirth resumed its downwards drift, and marriage age returned to its historic norms (Mintz “New Rules” 16-17). Besides, geographical mobility was reinforced by advances in transportation and communication. In the 1920s, the car had become an instrument of mass transportation, whose use rapidly increased. The highway interstate system (whose construction started in the 1950s) contributed to this mobility, especially perceived in *them* (Garraty 851).

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement, which had originated in the previous decade, gained prominence. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. In its final version, the act outlawed discrimination against African-Americans and women by employers; and destroyed the barriers to African-American vote in the South, moreover illegalizing racial segregation of all sorts. In 1965 and 1967, there were a series of devastating urban riots in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Newark and Detroit, mainly caused by the frustration, despair, and resentment of African-Americans over the still prevailing racial inequality. They were directed more at the social system than at individuals. The riots in Detroit could easily have been the worst since the Civil War (Garraty 825, 863): this is one of the central themes in *them*.

The sexual revolution of the time featured advances like pre-marital sex, tolerance of homosexuality and pornography, legalization of contraception and abortion. These transformations caused a profound shock in the religious community. Probably, most Americans did not alter their behavior, but it became possible to adopt different values with relative impunity, unlike in previous decades. The causes of the sexual revolution are complex, but in general, they were a chain of events. More efficient methods of birth control and antibiotics against sexually transmitted diseases eliminated the two main arguments against sex outside marriage: when it became possible to regard sex in merely physical terms and to notice that one's urges were not so uncommon as one had been led to believe, it became more difficult to object to any sexual activity among consenting adults. Homosexuals

began to protest against discrimination. The sexual revolution served useful functions: reducing irrational fears was liberating for both sexes, especially for women; and the sharing of the family duties on the part of males offered new satisfaction to men. However, the revolution also had disadvantages: some young people found this freedom upsetting, and at times, pressured by society, they entered into relations they were not ready to handle, and easy cures did not eradicate venereal diseases, so that an epidemic of gonorrhea appeared, etc. (Garraty 855, 870-871).

The sexual revolution contributed to the women's liberation movement in many ways. For instance, concern for better jobs and equal wages led to the demand of day-care centers for children, since all working women, married or not, continued to face discrimination. One of the leaders of the movement was Betty Friedan (author of *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963), who, along with other feminists, founded the National Organization for Women (NOW), which called for equal rights and opportunities in 1966. Some feminists formed small consciousness-raising groups which addressed different questions, like government-provided child-care centers, Miss American contest (which they denounced), and lesbianism. However, some women rejected the views of even moderate feminists (Garraty 872-873). As a result of all these influxes, in the 1960s in America, the ideal of the traditional family was altered by four major changes: rapid fertility decline, the sexual revolution, the movement of mothers into the labor force and the divorce revolution. All of them had emerged in the previous years and were accelerated in the 1960s (Popenoe 143).

In the 1970s, technological advances transformed family life. The availability of contraception implied that people were able to control the size of their family more easily. Family composition was also affected by decreased infant mortality and longer life expectancy (White and Woollett 11). By the beginning of the decade, very few women planned to discontinue their careers after marriage, but had anticipated, however, combining work, marriage and children as part of their goals. However, the corporate and male-dominated careers that women began entering during this decade have not adapted to accommodate what was still mainly considered women's familial responsibilities (Brannon 325, 454).

In the 1980s, the traditional family formed by husband, wife and children was no longer the norm. Many marriages ended in divorce, and many couples lived together and had children without getting married. A growing number of families were headed by single parents, many of them women. Between 1979 and 1987, the number of single-parents living below the poverty line increased by 46%. Most of them were African-American families. The economic opportunities were shifting from the production of goods to the production of services, that is, from wheat and manufacturing steel to advertisement, banking, and record keeping. Thus, blue-collar work changed to white-collar work, causing a demand for educated employees and increasing joblessness for the unskilled (Garraty 898-899).

In the 1990s, fathers increased their role as children's caregivers, but the main responsibility continued to fall upon the mother (Santrock 174). Women had higher levels of participation in higher education and the labor market, but this did not imply a significant change in behavior regarding domestic tasks, so women assumed a double burden, sometimes called "the second shift" (Oláh et al. 35). Reconstituted families increased as a result of divorce and separation. Thus, more children had the experience of more than one household (Hobson and Morgan 17). In the 1990s, fewer than 15% of families were composed by a breadwinner father, a housewife mother and their children (Mintz "New Rules" 16). As a result, "[l]a familia, además, *ya no es una familia patriarcal, amplia, generacional; la familia de hoy es unicelular, reducida, más restringida*" (Ríos González 24, emphasis in the original). We perceive this decay of the nuclear family along the novels of the corpus.

Besides, families became smaller than they used to be at most points in history. Just as many women became mothers as in the past, but they had fewer children. Another reason for this decrease in size is that grandparents and other relatives were less likely to live with parents and children. The ideal number of children was considered to be two or three, which was a common family size in the United States, although there were still preferences for larger families in certain groups. The birth intervals between children became smaller. Birth intervals of eighteen months to three years became most common, as seen when

comparing the children in *Carthage* to the biological family of the protagonist in *Wonderland*. An exception was the reconstituted families, where children born into a second marriage may be considerably younger than their siblings born to a first marriage (White and Woollett 82-83).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, job was more difficult to find and to maintain, and this had an obvious influence on the financial security of families (Travis 40). Economic changes and unemployment forced some couples to be more flexible about gender and family roles (White and Woollett 11). Around 2000, 40% of the children of the United States did not live with their biological fathers (Hobson and Morgan 4). Globalization had a direct and indirect effect on families: fathers lost their jobs due to the restructuring of work, and employment and unemployment policies were ruled by transnational organizations (both corporations and governments) (Hobson and Morgan 7).

Families exhibit many diverse forms which may be ascribed to different classifications. We shall now present the most common types of families.

This first cluster of families is not found in the corpus. The homosexual family is formed by two homosexual adults who live together and have a sexual relationship; they may have children or not. The cohabitated family is formed by two persons of different sex who live together and have a sexual relationship but are not legally married (Rico Sapena et al. 29), although we might include here as well homosexual, non-married couples. The polygynous family is constituted by a father/husband, two or more mothers/wives and their children, whereas the polyandrous family consists of one mother/wife, her children and two or more fathers/husbands (Levinson 440). Finally, the extended family is defined by Levinson (441) and Sauber (138) as two or more nuclear families affiliated by blood ties over at least three generations; that is, it consists of individuals who are recognized as both father/husband and son/brother or mother/wife and sister/daughter at the same time. It includes relationships between in-laws, cousins, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, grandparents, etc. The only linear relationship in these families is that between grandparents and

grandchildren. In America, the extended family has been common among rural and frontier societies and immigrants, as well as the very wealthy.<sup>9</sup>

The second cluster of family types has some presence in the corpus. It is formed by matrifocal or single-parent families; binuclear families; reconstituted, blended or stepfamilies; communal families and nuclear families.

First, matrifocal families consist of a mother and her children (Levinson 438). More recently, they have also been called by the more gender-neutral term “single-parent families,” which includes families composed of a parent and children, as O’Driscoll points out (56). We shall favor the latter term for considering it more inclusive. In our corpus, the most clear-cut example of single-parent families is Clara and Swan from *Garden* before her marriage to Revere. In *them*, Loretta’s father lives with her and her brother Brock after his wife dies. In *Wonderland*, Grandpa Vogel becomes Jesse’s guardian for a brief period of time. In *Carthage*, Brett’s family is a single-parent one since his father Graham died before the main events of the plot: Brett lives with his mother Ethel. In *Bird*, there are two single-parent families: the one formed by Lucille and her children Ben and Krista after she divorces Edward, besides the one formed by Delray and his son Aaron after Zoe’s murder.

Second, a binuclear family is a family divided in two due to a divorce. It is composed by two nuclear families: the family of the mother and the family of the father. Each of them may be formed by one parent; or two, if that parent has married again (Rico Sapena et al. 29). We find this family in *Mulvaneys*, *Bird* and *Carthage*, where the married couples are either separated or divorced.

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<sup>9</sup> Extended families may have four different structures, according to Nimkoff (qtd. in Levinson 441). First, the stem family, composed by two nuclear families in adjacent generations with one son/husband or daughter/wife who is a member of both families. Second, the lineal family, or one nuclear family in the senior generation and two or more nuclear families in the junior generation. Third, the fully extended family, which consists of the families of at least two siblings or cousins in each of at least two adjacent generations. Fourth, the joint family, or two or more nuclear families who form a corporate economic unit. There are no extended families living together in the corpus.

Third, stepfamilies are also called “reconstituted” or “blended” families. These families are built upon adoptions, which take place when children are brought up by people who did not conceive or gave birth to them. The children may be adopted by a person, a couple; or, in cases where a new couple is recently formed, they may be the children that a partner (or at times both partners) of the new couple has had from a previous union. In speaking of children, parents often distinguish between “his,” “hers” or “ours.” In the past, it was a manner of overcoming infertility and providing illegitimate children with families. It usually occurred soon after the children were born, but later on it also became common to adopt older children who would otherwise be raised in foster care. Besides, as the rates of divorce increased, stepfamilies increased too (White and Woollett 33, Mintz “New Rules” 16, Sauber et al. 36). There are three basic forms of stepfamilies: first, a family in which children live with a remarried parent and a stepparent; second, a family in which children from a previous marriage visit their remarried parent and stepparent; and third, a family in which the couple is not married, and the children from a previous marriage either live with or visit the couple (Sauber et al. 379). We find blended families in *Garden*, *Wonderland* and *them*. They belong to the first type of stepfamilies, since all the members of the family live together in the same house.

Fourth, a communal family is formed by a group of persons living together, who share diverse aspects of their lives (Rico Sapena et al. 29). They do not need to have common biological ties. We find this in *Wonderland* with Shelley’s manifestation of having formed a counterculture family with her lover and friends.

Finally, the nuclear family consists, in its most basic definition, of mother/wife, father/husband and their children. It is a social group whose members stand in a relation of parent, child, spouse, or sibling to each other through birth, marriage or adoption. Thus, nuclear families may include other more specific combinations of families: for instance, a family unit may be both nuclear and blended. Nuclear families are typical of Western societies. They are institutionalized as entities on their own right (Levinson 439-440, Rico Sapena et al. 30). Adams (qtd. in Levinson 439-440) sees the nuclear family as a collection of three dyadic relations: the conjugal or sexual; the maternal and the paternal.

Nuclear families are the most common type of families in the corpus. They are present in *Expensive*, where Richard lives with his parents Elwood and Nada Everett; in *Carthage*, where Zeno and Arlette live with their daughters Juliet and Cressida; in *them*, where Loretta first marries Howard and gives birth to Jules, Maureen and Betty; and then forms a new nuclear family for a brief period with Furlong and their son Randolph; in *Mulvaney's*, the couple Michael and Corinne have four children: Mike, Patrick, Marianne and Judd; in *Garden*, the protagonist's family of birth, the Walpoles, is made up of Carleton and Pearl and their children Sharleen, Mike, Clara, Rodwell and Roosevelt. Revere's first marriage to Marguerite constitutes a nuclear family as well with their children Clark, Jonathan and Robert. After Marguerite's death, Revere forms a new nuclear family with Clara and Swan, as well as his other sons. At the beginning of *Wonderland*, Jesse's biological family, the Hartes, is also nuclear: its members are the parents Nancy and Willard and Jesse's siblings Jean, Shirley and Bob. Two of Jesse's adoptive families are nuclear: the one formed by his unnamed uncle and aunt, who have a son, Fritz; and the Pedersens, Karl and Mary and their children Friedrich and Hilda. Later on, Jesse will form his own family, the Vogels, by marrying Helene and having two daughters; Jeanne and Shelley.

The nuclear family is a subtype of family formed by a heterosexual couple and its children. In this work, we shall examine a traditional enactment of the nuclear families which has developed within the patriarchal society (formed by the breadwinner father, the mother/housewife and the children), although not all nuclear families necessarily follow this model.

Kathleen Gough and Claude Lévi-Straus provide a general description of the family that corresponds rather accurately to our understanding of the traditional nuclear family. According to Gough, "[t]he family can be defined as a married couple or a group of adult relatives who cooperate both economically and in the raising of children and who generally live in the same house" (115). For her, families are articulated around a set of four main rules. First, the banning of incest and marriage between close relatives. The extension of this rule varies depending on the society. Second, the cooperation between men and



women within a family is based on a gendered division of work: women take care of the children and the house, whereas men work outside the domestic realm. The strictness of this division also varies depending on the culture. Third, marriage is a socially recognized relationship between men and women. It is usually lasting (although it does not necessarily last indefinitely). This relationship is the origin of social fatherhood, a special bond between a man and the children of his wife. Although this man and children are not necessarily biologically related, the general expectation is that they are indeed related by blood (of course, Gough refers here to the legitimacy over the children). Fourth, men generally have a higher status than women and hold a greater degree of authority upon their female relatives. At times, however, old women may have some influence or authority upon young men. Gough then admits the existence of matriarchal societies, like the hopi in Arizona, but although she recognizes that in such matrilineal societies, property, social position, and belonging to the group are inherited through the maternal line, Gough still attributes the ultimate source of power in these matrilineal societies to men, asserting that women simply have more independence than women in patrilineal societies. In short, she denies that these societies are truly matriarchal (Gough 115-117).

Lévi-Strauss defines the family as being originated in a marriage and composed by husband, wife and their children, and sometimes other relatives as well (17). The members of the family are bond by legal ties; economic, religious and some other types of rights and obligations and a net of sexual rights and prohibitions, as well as a certain number of psychological feelings such as love, affection, fear, respect, etc. The only essential requisite to create a family so is the previous existence of two families who will provide a man and a woman to start their own family, which would constitute the third one, and subsequently repeat the process (36).

Musitu and Herrero offer a clear definition of the nuclear family, arguing that it explicitly assumes that the basic and universal bonds of the family have a biological basis and are integrated into the cultural and social levels. They involve the socially approved satisfaction of sexual and economic needs. Nuclear families constitute a cooperative

unit which is in charge of the survival, care and education of the children (19). In C. P. Stone's words, this kind of family is bound together by tight emotional bonds and a high degree of domestic privacy. It is also concerned by the raising of children (qtd. in Musitu and Herrero 19).

The contemporary concept of nuclear family is often attributed to the Victorian period, although actually, it was typical of the middle-class. Even as such, it constituted more a façade than a substantial truth. The ideal Victorian middle-class family consolidated male power and wealth. It was designed to contain and protect the capital of the bourgeois families, with the support of the law. This was not only justified on moral grounds, but also romanticized and promoted as desirable for everyone. The growth of literacy, media and the libraries contributed to publicize a highly idealistic notion of marriage (Wykes and Welsh 92-93). As Giddens argues, romances were the first form of literature to reach a mass population. The ideals of romantic love disentangled the marital bond from wider kinship ties and gave it special significance. The home also started to be perceived as a distinct environment differentiated from work, and became a place where individuals could expect emotional support, in contrast with the instrumental character of the work setting (qtd. in Wykes and Welsh 93). The focus on home and the nuclear family served to consolidate patriarchal power over wives and children within the privacy of the family's four walls (Wykes and Welsh 93).

Foucault (qtd. in Wykes and Welsh 94) argued that the family and sexual discourse was barely prominent prior to the eighteenth century, but then became a pivotal factor in the reorganization of popular life that was necessary for nineteenth century capitalism. A workforce was needed to serve the emerging economy of the nineteenth century, and at the same time, law and order should be maintained. Besides, the use that each individual made of sex was another important issue to be considered (Wykes and Welsh 94).

Social reproduction was key to wealth generation, and sexual reproduction key to produce the next generation of wealth producers. Sex had to be regulated and managed in ways conducive to the needs of state and capital. This

involved a dual project of supporting appropriate sexuality and closing down undesirable sexuality. Central to this was the promulgation of the bourgeois model of marriage and family, as these served both capital and patriarchy, whilst simultaneously criminalising, medicalising, imprisoning or concealing other forms of sexuality. [...] Familial morality was seen as essential to a strong nation and educating the working classes was a key part of constructing that *family*. (Wykes and Welsh 94, emphasis in the original)

Women were key to this, as their reproductive role was emphasized. There were contradictions between the prevailing moral discourse and the occurrence of practices such as prostitution and incest. These contradictions were built up on deep class divides around patriarchal power. At the beginning of the twentieth century, feminists both promoted a more spiritual love in contrast with male's sex obsession, and they also struggled for suffrage (Wykes and Welsh 94-95). In *Dangerous Sexualities* (1987), F. Mort discusses the maleness of power in social and sexual structures:

Discourses of sex have constructed men and women in terms of difference, difference shot through with power relations. That insight must put the issue of male sexuality firmly on the political agenda. Not, let it be clear, men and their desires as the unified, monolithic oppressor, the source of all power, but men as they appear in this history. Men whose constructed sexualities, identities and pleasures have been complexly written into many of the structures of social and political domination. (qtd. in Wykes and Welsh 95)

As mentioned, traditional nuclear families originated inside a patriarchal society. As Rich explains, patriarchy is a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men –by force, direct pressure, ritual, law, language, customs, etiquette, education and division of labor– determine what part women must or must not play; and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. It does not

necessarily imply that all women are powerless, or a direct transmission of the father's power into the son (57).

The nuclear family is presented by patriarchy as the most beneficial and harmonious arrangement for its members. This is part of the reason why “[a]ny challenge to the traditional family structure is not usually well received, at least by mainstream ideology” (Lee and Flys Junquera 15). In this manner, strong family units occupy a key discursive space as the means to an orderly public society, whereas family disfunction, family collapse or single parenting are readily linked to criminalized children in popular discourses (Wykes and Welsh 96). In conclusion, the family

has been and remains a central tenet of explanation for all manner of social problems as with its assumption that the ideal nuclear family is the solution. [...] What is taken for granted is the premise that ideal nuclear family relationships produce normal girls and boys and consequently men and women, so deviance must indicate dysfunctional family life. (Wykes and Welsh 105)

However, research developed in the United Kingdom has shown that much abuse is perpetrated by a male relative, and that most victims are little girls (Wykes and Welsh 106). This is demonstrated in Oates's fiction, as we shall see: the most “normalized,” heterosexual, functional, middle or high class families often hide experiences of violence, as seen in *Expensive*, where the protagonist fantasizes with killing his mother; or in *Zombie*, which presents an affectionate accommodated family whose son is a violent sexual predator.

This is why Wykes and Welsh warn that

[t]he concept of the nuclear family remains a powerful model of romantic commitment, happy childhood and welcoming hearths, even though the perfect nuclear family is certainly a myth for many of us in the twenty-first century. Indeed, it has arguably always been little more than an ideal, although, nonetheless, an ideal that informs much of Western morality, its sense of stability and value-system. What is perhaps most interesting about the concept

of the model family is how persistent and pervasive it is, despite the reality, and how it became such a dominant aspect of social and sexual organisation. (92)

In this work, the traditional nuclear family shall be interpreted as being formed by three main roles: the breadwinner father/husband, the mother/housewife, and the children. This heterosexual couple should be married, and the children should be legitimately born inside the marriage. In other words, this family has generally a biological origin which becomes socially integrated and legitimized by means of marriage and procreation. This family exhibits a gendered division of work in which women are restricted to the private space in order to assume childrearing and household responsibilities, and in which men work in the public space for a salary. Besides, the father/husband is considered the head of the family, and as such, he holds a great degree of authority upon his wife and children. This division according to gender is justified on the bases of certain discourses that construct men and women in terms of difference. Therefore, these traditional nuclear families originate inside a patriarchal society, which presents them as the most beneficial and harmonious arrangement (as opposed to other family arrangements such as single parenting), and as the guarantee of the safety and well-being of all its members

In summary, the patriarchal conception of the family is founded, as we shall see in the corpus, around four basic notions: privacy, property, protection, and gender inequality.

Concerning the first of these notions, privacy, Parsons defends a traditional conception of nuclear families, which he describes as an isolated self-sufficient subsystem in which the father and mother do not depend on other familial or external support (qtd. in Everingham 37). Parson's views are shared by Habermas. Feminist intellectuals have challenged this conception of a family as a self-sufficient system, since they feel that Parsons's vision ignores the reality that the raising of a child takes place in a social sphere; and assumes as normal what is actually pathological: that some parents are isolated from the community. This criticism focuses on two main points. First, it is centered around the consideration that the autonomous family unit is a political and economic construction which requires a continuous

institutional support to maintain this apparent autonomous status. In contrast, Habermas perceives the intervention of the state as a restriction to the autonomy of individuals within a family. Second, the nuclear family has a strong bond to relatives, friends, and other communal forms of social organization, and it is still women's responsibility to keep these bonds, whose existence has been diminished and even questioned by Habermas (Everingham 37-38, 158).

Thus, the total isolation of the nuclear family has been questioned, but actually, it remains one of its central ideals. O'Driscoll makes a fundamental observation regarding the relative isolated status of families. According to her, the fact that families are private and autonomous institutions considerably liberates them from the scrutiny of those who are not part of the relationship. Within broad limits, parents are at liberty to decide what is good for their children and how to obtain it. Family activities are legitimately removed from public view, knowledge and control (85). This privacy, as suggested, sometimes conceals familial violence from the public view, as Barnett et al. explain in the introduction to their book *Family Violence Across the Lifespan* (xix). In Wykes and Welsh's view, "[f]amily ideals include privacy and sanctity, real and metaphoric, inhibiting efforts, real or represented, to access and change family, let alone deal with men's violences therein" (162-163). This is perceived in the corpus in the incestual rape of a child in *Garden* and in the hidden psychological violence in *Wonderland*. This privacy thus hinders a possible intervention to protect the victims.

The second central notion related to the nuclear patriarchal family is property. Property is understood in two senses: the literal one (wealth) and a metaphorical one (possessing other people.) First, as Irigaray affirms in an interview compiled in "Women-Mothers: The Silent Subsystem," the family is the origin of private property, and the law of the property owner (50). Rich agrees with this statement: she considers that the idea of property and the desire to see one's property transmitted to one's biological descendants is placed in the individual family unit within a patriarchal structure (60). Property is then centered around the father/husband, as Rich argues:

At this crossroad of sexual possession, property ownership, and the desire to transcend death, developed the institution we know: the present-day patriarchal family with its supernaturalizing of the penis, its division of labor by gender, its emotional, physical, and material possessiveness, its ideal of the monogamous marriage until death (and its severe penalties for adultery by the wife), the “illegitimacy” of a child born outside wedlock, the economic dependency of women, the unpaid domestic services of the wife, the obedience of women and children to male authority, the imprinting and combination of heterosexual roles. (60-61)

The questions of property and possession are prevalent in the corpus, where fathers and sons yearn to dominate their wives and mothers, especially in the early novels. The later works, such as *Bird*, show a more democratic bond within the family circle.

The third factor that defines the nuclear family is their supposed adherence to the protection of its members, a characteristic noticed by Musitu and Herrero (19). Nisbet argues that kinship was for a very long time human’s only form of social organization, and the only nexus between the individual and nature. It was the indispensable protection against the uncertainties of life (xix-xx). Thus, one of the basic reasons why human beings are inclined to unite and form groups is gaining protection from external dangers and violence. As Sofsky puts it,

[I]a sociedad no se funda ni en un impulso irresistible de sociabilidad ni en necesidades laborales. Es la experiencia de la violencia la que une a los hombres. La sociedad es un aparato de protección mutua. Ella pone fin a la libertad absoluta. En adelante, no todo estará permitido. [...] La ocasión y el motivo de la socialización es el miedo que sienten los hombres unos de otros. [...] Esta confianza en que la propia integridad no se verá amenazada es uno de los pilares insustituibles de la vida social. En ella se sustenta la capacidad de cambiar de perspectiva, la fe en el futuro del mundo y el intercambio de palabras y gestos. Sólo la renuncia a la violencia, sólo el contrato que obliga

al respeto recíproco crea la condición de posibilidad de la vida social. (8-9)

Although Sossky refers to society, his appreciation could be extended to one of the basic groups that compose our social structures, the family, which as commented, often exhibits high degrees of violence. Thus, paradoxically, families are born to gain protection from the experience of violence; but, despite this origin, violence also commonly explodes within families, as seen in the corpus. As Straus and Steinmetz argue, “the family is the most physically violent group or institution that a typical citizen is likely to encounter” (qtd. in Stark and Flitcraft 297). According to Margolin et al., the family is the training ground for violence, since it is the setting where many people first experience physical violence. There are values of love and harmony related to the family, but also norms that permit some of its members to be violent towards others (for instance, for the sake of raising a child) (98).

As Ammerman et al., and Fontes and McCloskey suggest, it is not easy to identify family violence, first of all, because it is a private issue. According to Fontes and McCloskey, the cultural imperative in Western industrialized nations is often to stay out of a family’s private business; therefore, the violence against women during marriage is heavily influenced by the nuclear family arrangement of the male/female heterosexual dyad in one relatively isolated household. This violence becomes visible only if it spills out into the wider family or community. A wealthy family is likely to have even greater privacy, and this is the reason why violence in lower socioeconomic status comes to the attention of authorities more easily: wealth buys privacy. And so, the common belief that violence does not occur in upper class families is not accurate (158). Secondly, according to Ammerman et al., most victims do not disclose the abuse because they fear retribution, dissolution of the family, the negative effects of the abuser leaving the house (e.g., financial loss), etc. This fear is especially sensed by children or elder people, who might be afraid of losing the economic support and care that they receive, despite the fact that it can be insufficient. Thirdly, the effects of violence are not always visible (as it is the case with psychological maltreatment). Besides, the abuses are rarely directly witnessed (4-5). The three difficulties of identifying



family violence are patent in the psychological violence in *Wonderland*, for instance.

Finally, the traditional nuclear family exhibits a blatant gender inequality among its members, by which the mother/wife and the children are subject to the father/husband. Besides, the mother and father have social roles clearly defined and prescribed by society. As Parsons asserts, the mother's role is "expressive," that is, highly personalized and emotional, focused on maintaining the family's internal relationships. The father's role is the instrumental axis, focused on his breadwinning function and functioning as a link between the family and the society (qtd. in Everingham 37). Moreover, the wife is expected not only to bear children, but also to serve her husband's sexual needs, independently of her opinion. From this, we may infer that, as Wykes and Welsh argue, the family is

a technology of power with sex at its centre. It operates to support and legitimate hegemonic masculinity by appropriately placing women and children in relation to that and calling all men to comply. That process is underwritten by the state because the family is also a mechanism of social control and ordering. (162-163)

Indeed, as Wykes and Welsh point out, the term family comes from the Latin *famulus* ("servant"), and in fact women used to be subject to their husbands not only legally and economically, but also physically, since they were granted sexual intercourse at any time (32).

As suggested, the traditional nuclear family has an extremely rigid role division based on gender. According to Everingham, Wright, and Brannon, current gender stereotypes can be traced back to the Victorian conceptualizations of the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution changed the lives of people in Europe and North America: men left the house to earn money and women stayed at home with the children. Men and women had to adapt to this unprecedented situation in history by creating new patterns of behavior. These changes produced two beliefs: the Doctrine of the Two Spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood. On the one hand, the Doctrine of the Two Spheres asserts that men and women have separate areas of influence and interests: for women, these

are the home and the children, that is, the private world of the family where relations are based on love; and for men, the outside world, the public world of capitalism where relationships are based on money. These two spheres are the opposite ends of one dimension and have little overlap. They are the origins of the polarization of male and female activities. Feminism considers that this division into two spheres is patriarchal.

The Cult of True Womanhood arose between 1820 and 1860. It was diffused through women's magazines and religious literature, and it promised happiness and power to Victorian women. This doctrine comprised four main virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Piety alluded to the belief that women are naturally inclined to religion due to their moral superiority. Women were thought to be uninterested in sex, but still they could be vulnerable to seduction, and so the loss of purity represented a fate that was worse than death. Men were also expected to be virtuous and religious, but they were not supposed to be so naturally inclined to these qualities. They were prone to seduction and brutishness, and it corresponded to women to withstand their advances. Through association with the cult, men could increase their virtue. Submissiveness was not desirable in men, who were supposed to be strong, wise and forceful. Women, on the contrary, were expected to be weak, dependent and shy. These women wanted strong men, and so they formed families in which the husband was superior and no one was to question his authority.

Domesticity is connected to submissiveness and to the Doctrine of the Two Spheres. Women were concerned with domestic affairs, that is, making a home and having children. They were daughters and sisters, and especially wives and mothers. This arrangement was so demanding that only a few women, if any, met its criteria. However, its influence can be detected even in our current views of femininity. These divisions between male and female spaces formed the basis for the polarization of male and female interests and activities (Everingham 147, Wright 296, Brannon 161-164, 167).

Hutter asserts that, just like all other human societies, families are differentiated on the basis of age and sex: they are composed of members of various ages who are differentially related. As many

sociological accounts of the family emphasize, age differentiation of family members enhances their solidarity, and the interdependence of its members has been seen to foster emotional attachments, structural solidarity, and family cohesion, although differential age also causes tension and conflicts. Moreover, differential age structures have commonly been associated with status discrepancies in power, privilege, and prestige, and so families can be regarded as hierarchical social structures in which, usually, older generations or older siblings hold positions of authority and prestige over their younger counterparts (“General” 311). This hierarchical structure is clearly perceived in *Wonderland*, where Jesse’s biological siblings hold positions of power and knowledge according to their age. But not all families are constructed around a system of authority.

Families are articulated around a set of socially established roles which their members assume, originated in the age and authority of these members. The following paragraphs offer a primary approach to family roles by resorting to the theoretical framework provided by role theory, as described by Sauber et al., González Ríos, Bernard and Bryant and DeMorris.

Role theory reveals that roles entail obligations to be met and expectations to be fulfilled; roles may be complementary, stereotyped and inflexible, and there may be confusion in identifying, accepting or enacting them, so as a consequence conflict may arise (Sauber et al. 344). Patriarchal ideology considers that the essential roles in a family are the father, the mother and the children, which are analyzed in the subsequent chapters taking role theory as a departure point in order to scrutinize the effects of role obligations and expectations on the members of the family.

Sociologists in the field of role theory classify roles into two basic types: ascribed and achieved roles. Ascribed roles are formed by factors over which the individual has no control (e.g., gender and race), whereas achieved roles are earned on the basis of individual achievement (e.g., being authoritarian, or a moderator). These two kinds of roles often overlap in families. Family structure is often so obscured in its early developments that the family members may not know the origins of their roles and may feel trapped in them. The status

of each family member having her/his own unique role is called role differentiation. The cost of such differentiation to both the individual and the family is that, to remain a part of the family and yet still have individual unique qualities, the individual may distort or simplify personal emotions. In other words, each member experiences pressure to be both a unique individual and a valued member of the family (Sauber et al. 343). This notion is equivalent to Solomon's distinction of vertical and horizontal identities. The corpus holds numerous examples of the problems that arise from having an extremely unbalanced relationship between both.

The family members relate to each other forming subsystems, as Ríos González (68-69) and Sauber et al. (386) explain. Within a family, subsystems are specific regroupings of its members, which are differentiated by generation, gender, interest, or function, such as the dyads of husband-wife, mother-father, father-child, mother-child, and child-child. An individual can belong to a number of subsystems.

These subsystems may be rigid or open, depending on their resistance to changes in the explicit or implicit rules that govern the communication among its members. More specifically, in an open family system there are two main operating parameters. First, honest self-expression by the participating members is permitted. In such a family, differences are viewed as natural, and open negotiation occurs to resolve the differences before they are allowed to develop in excess in the family. Second, regarding the relationship between the family and the outside world, boundaries are permeable and not rigid. Rigid family systems present the opposite situation.

Since the (members of) subsystems play a specialized role within the larger system, and adopting a certain role involves having obligations to be met and expectations to be fulfilled, pressure is usually exerted over them in order to satisfy needs, claim rewards, or aspire to something. One of the fundamental principles of role behavior is that conformity to the role is not universal, and so not everyone lives up to its specifications, either in the psychological or in the sociological definition of the concept. Moreover, Bernard remarks, roles are not static: they evolve and develop according to the historical, political and

social circumstances they are framed into (263). Due to this, the historical context shall be taken into account when describing roles.

It has been often suggested that families often exhibit reciprocal and dyadic relationships. Nonetheless, the internal organization of families is much more complex than this dynamic suggests. In fact, Bryant and DeMorris argue that the dyadic nature of family relationships is just a myth: that is, dyadic interactions within the family do not entail a reciprocal bond between the members of the subsystem, but, on the contrary, will influence and be influenced by whoever else is present. A study by Bryant (1989) proved that what parents and siblings do is in part interdependent. For instance, mothers and older siblings shared a concern factor in common with respect to, for example, younger siblings. Similarly, siblings' relationships are moderated by the relationship that children have with their mothers; and mother-child relations are moderated by the relation that siblings have (Bryant and DeMorris 170-172). These situations are abundant in the corpus.

Apart from reciprocity, complementarity also conditions role relations, as Sauber et al. remark. In general, complementarity attempts to fill out, complete, or make perfect what is not so; that is, to mutually supply each other's lacks in areas such as satisfactions, avenues of solution of conflict, support for a need of self-image, and means of reinforcing the defenses against stress. More specifically, the complementarity of roles entails a relationship in which each person automatically acts in conformity to the role that she/he is expected to assume by the other/partner. This means that complementarity functions under the assumption that a role does not exist in isolation but is always patterned to deal with the complementary or reciprocal role of a partner.

Complementarity in family roles may be classified as positive or negative. Positive complementarity exists when family members of pairs and triads experience the mutual fulfilment of a need that promotes the emotional growth of the relationship. Negative complementarity implies a strengthening of defenses against pathological anxiety but does not significantly foster positive emotional growth. It mainly neutralizes the destructive effects of conflict and

anxiety and barricades family relationships and vulnerable family members against trends toward disorganization (Sauber et al. 68-69). John Spiegel argues that role complementarity accounts for the degree of harmony and stability that exists in interpersonal relationships. He cites five causes for the failure to develop this complementarity in families: cognitive discrepancy, discrepancy of goals, allocative discrepancy, instrumental discrepancy and discrepancy in cultural values orientation (qtd. in Sauber et al. 340). According to Sauber et al., in allocative discrepancy we perceive a failure in role complementarity, where one person questions another's person right to a role that person has assumed; and instrumental discrepancy appears in a situation in which one partner has something, (e.g., money) that gives that partner leverage that the other partner does not have). These discrepancies may result in tension, anxiety and frustration (10, 69, 209).

Role conflict arises from the disparities between the family members' perceptions about each other's roles. Each member has a conception of her/his role in the family, as well as the roles of the other members. The factors on which these two conceptions are based may be similar: the family of origins, sexual identification, sense of personal identity, and social expectations. However, one's conception of her/his own role and the conception of the others might differ. In some families, the roles are complementary and so the family functions adequately; but if the family lacks complementarity, conflicts may appear. There are five main ways in which families deal with conflict. First, the conflict may be openly expressed and solved through normal channels of communication. Second, it might be recognized but obscured through patterns of communication that conceal or evade conflict. Third, it can be expressed by acting-out problems, rather than through a rational consideration of solutions. Fourth, it might be projected on a member in the form of a neurotic and psychotic disorder. Fifth, it may be evaded by limiting or avoiding physical or psychological contact with members (Sauber et al. 340-341, 344).

In short, the family can be considered as a small-scale system constantly changing its equilibrium. When role equilibrium is present, decision making takes place at a low level, events tend to occur in automatic fashion, and there is considerable spontaneity in family

members interacting with each other. When complementarity fails through role conflict, the interpersonal relations move toward disequilibrium. This failure of complementarity is so disruptive that it is nearly always accompanied by processes of restoration of reequilibrium, namely, role reversal, coercion, coaxing, or postponement (Sauber et al. 341).

Violence plays a central role in the corpus, since not only is it present in all novels, but it usually occupies a dominant position in the characters' development and their relationship with their families. Most of the times, this violence is exerted within the family unit. The major forms of violence discussed are emotional neglect in *Expensive* and *Wonderland*, psychological violence in *Wonderland* and *Carthage*, physical child abuse in *Garden* and *them*, murder-suicides in *Wonderland* and *Garden*, bullying in *Bird*, rape in *Mulvaneys* and murders in *Expensive*, *them* and *Bird*. With the exception of the three last examples (the bullying, the rape and the murders), all these acts are committed within the family. Then, violence shall frequently be analyzed as one of the sources, or one of the effects, of role conflict or distortion in the corpus. In the next paragraphs, we shall make a general introduction to the topic, and then focus on the role of violence in Oates's fiction.

The Committee on Family Violence on the National Institute of Mental Health (1992) included in its definition of violence

acts that are physically and emotionally harmful or that carry the potential to cause physical harm [...] [and] may also include sexual coercion or assaults, physical intimidation, threats to kill or to harm, restraint of normal activities or freedom, and denial of access to resources. (Bachman 108)

More specifically, family violence comprises a multitude of diverse negative interactions that occur between different family members and other intimates (Barnett et al. 276). Straus defines some characteristics that make family violence a specific kind of violence. First, the family is a special type of social group from other small groups. Statuses and roles within a family are usually assigned on the basis of age and sex,

instead of interest or competence as in other social groups. Second, there are conflictive normative expectations within a family about violence, but there are long-standing implied rights or obligations to use force on family members by, usually, husbands. Third, commitment to family makes it difficult to abandon a situation of violence at home, especially in the case of legal, moral, financial and affective commitments. Fourth, most families are characterized by emotional involvements which complicate even further the experience of violence. Fifth, family violence has traditionally been considered a private matter. Sixth, the family is a highly stressful unit due to its inherently unstable nature (qtd. in O'Leary 36).

A notable characteristic of violence is that, despite the multiple forms it may adopt, it is usual for several types of violence to occur simultaneously, especially in cases of intrafamilial violence. Barnett et al. highlight the blurred limits of family violence: "violent families rarely 'specialize' in one form of violence. Husbands who physically assault their wives, for example, are likely to psychologically mistreat and even rape them" (276). Similarly, couples who are violent with each other tend to be violent towards their children, and these children would commonly be aggressive among them too (Barnett et al. 276).

Since there are considerable differences between these types of conduct, they shall be considered individually in their corresponding section, which focuses on their particular causes and consequences as well as the precise characteristics of aggressors and survivors. However, violence has a series of general consequences. There are two basic consequences of violence for its survivors, who may (particularly in cases of rape) tend to suffer from guilt, especially self-blame, and to identify themselves as objects to be used and abused. Janoff-Bulman (qtd. in De Zulueta 207) distinguishes two types of guilt. The first type of guilt, "behavioural self-blame," implies that survivors blame themselves for their own behavior leading up to the assault. This restores a sense of control over their future lives, since they feel that they can take measures to protect themselves better if they are attacked again.

The second type of guilt is called "characterological self-blame," and involves attributions to one's enduring personality characteristics.



It is maladaptive, that is, the survivor focuses on the past, pondering if she/he deserved the attack. This reaction affects the survivor's self of sense, and often implies the identification with the aggressor, as, for instance, in cases of child sexual abuse. The second effect of violence is that it often causes survivors to feel as objects to be used or abused (De Zulueta 17). This has negative effects over their sense of self-worth.

More specifically, according to Straus, one of the unintended consequences of experiencing violence in the family is the association of love with violence. The abused person learns that those who love her/him the most are also those who harm her/him and have the right to do it. Another unintended consequence is the lesson that when something is really important, it justifies the use of physical violence (qtd. in Margolin et al. 98).

Joyce Carol Oates has constantly faced accusations of writing fiction that is excessively violent. She has always refused to admit this, and she asserts that in describing such events, she is just reflecting the reality that we experience everyday:

I don't accept charges that I am unduly violent in my writing. Most of my novels and stories are explorations of the contemporary world interpreted in a realist mode, from what might be called a tragic and humanistic viewpoint. Tragedy always upholds the human spirit because it is an exploration of human nature in terms of its strengths. One simply cannot know strengths unless suffering, misfortune, and violence are explored quite frankly by the writer. [...] Since approximately 1965 I have set myself the task, in both novels and short stories, of exploring contemporary society on many levels. My focus has been a close examination of the sources of power. The political and economic milieu; professions like medicine, the law, and most recently education and religion; and, to some extent, the predicament of the young and of women—all these have fascinated me. (Oates "Interview. b" *Conversations with Joyce* 106)

Therefore, she defends the presence of violence in her fiction by describing it as a reflection of an external reality. As she has affirmed,

“[w]hen people say there is too much violence in Oates, what they are saying is there is too much reality in life” (“Emergence” 90).



## 2 PARENTS

This chapter introduces the discussion of family roles by taking as a departing point the transition to parenthood as well as parenting styles. At the same time, it serves to introduce some of the main questions that will be dealt with in the following chapters, such as the roles of mothers, fathers and children and their corresponding subsystems; role conflicts and obligations; issues of possessiveness and control, loss, violence, food and language; the search for identity; the dichotomy between body and mind; gender and patriarchy, etc. The theoretical framework is composed by works by the philosophers Mikhail Bakhtin and Luce Irigaray, the psychiatrist Carl Solomon, and the researchers on developmental psychology White and Woollet, among others.

The transition to parenthood is a key transition for the family that shall be analyzed by taking into account the case of Jesse and Helene in *Wonderland*, since they offer the most detailed account of this process in the corpus. Additionally, we shall mention some other works in order to provide a more exhaustive analysis.

According to Binda and Crippa, the relationship between a couple becomes more defined with the birth of a child than it was at the moment of the formation of the couple. A permanent bond is formed among them, and they become a parental couple (117-118). In *Carthage*, we learn that Zeno loves his wife even more after the birth of their daughters; and in *Wonderland*, having children was one of Jesse's most important life goals.

Becoming a parent, Palacios González reflects (78-79, 81-83), is a different experience for every person. In general, it marks the beginning of a period of uneven length which carries changes that affect diverse areas. Above all, it implies the adaptation to a situation that arises important demands and requires the adoption of new roles. It also brings changes to daily habits, and impacts on both self-concept and self-esteem. Most of the changes caused by the arrival of a baby are

experimented in a negative manner, such as alterations of sleep hours, free time, sexual habits, time for the couple or friends, and money expenses; but there are also positive traits associated to having a baby: creation of emotional bonds derived from the contact with the baby, feelings of personal fulfillment, feelings of family cohesion, the social worth of children, as well as feeling like a true adult, maturing, providing sense to one's life, etc. The birth of a child implies that the only dyad woman-man of the nuclear family becomes a triadic relationship: mother-father-child. There might be other combinations in other types of families involving, for instance, same-sex parents, single parents or other caregivers. In any case, the family, independently of its configuration, is amplified by the addition of a child.

The birth of a child constitutes then an important step towards adulthood, as Binda and Crippa conclude (124), but the corpus shows that not all parents mature by having offspring. For instance, Loretta, in *them*, remains a rather childish and nonchalant person despite having children. Parenthood does not only affect the parents but the whole extended family: it can enhance the quality of the couple's relationship and lead to closer ties to other family members. Children help to create new social networks, and new interests and activities. They may validate their parents' status and ensure parents' acceptance within the family and as responsible members of the community. At the same time, children are contemplated as costly: they can be financially, socially and emotionally draining. They also restrict parents' activities and their time together, as well as disrupting established routines and reducing parents' opportunities to pursue their own interests. They can also be a source of anxiety for parents. Moreover, children increase the amount of work that needs to be done, and this may generate conflicts, as a study by J. Busfield has proved (White and Woollett 16-17, 24, 25).

A recurrent episode in Oates's work is the children's fascination with their parents' past as a childless unmarried couple. Children are possibly astonished to realize that their parents had their own independent life and relationship before they were born, as if it were a kind of secret life they do not know much about. But in fact, this bond can often explain the kind of relationship they hold later as a married

couple and as parents. This fascination with parental life is shared by Oates herself:

No romance is so profound and so enduring as the romance of early childhood. The yearning we feel through our lives for our young, attractive, and mysterious parents—who were so physically close to us and yet, apart from us, inaccessible and unknowable. Is this the very origin of “romance,” coloring and determining all that is to follow in our lifetimes? (*Lost* 8)

She asserts that her writing is in part an attempt to memorialize her parent’s vanished world: “sometimes directly, sometimes in metaphor.” For instance, she mentions that the novel *Marya: A Life*<sup>10</sup> is a mixture of her mother’s early life and her own adolescence and young adult experience (Oates “Conversations” 178).

The yearning of children for their young parents is materialized in Oates’s work in a recurrent scene of a child finding a photograph of her/his parents and staring at it in fascination. There are several instances of this in the corpus. In the revised version of *Garden*, Swan, who is terribly troubled about his real origins, finds a photograph of his mother Clara with his stepfather Revere on their wedding day. Swan was a small child when Clara and Revere got married, so he is intrigued about what Revere’s family knows about his mother’s past. Furthermore, after Zoe’s murder in *Bird*, her son Aaron finds a stack of photographs in her room

he hadn’t wanted to see, yes but he’d looked, there was Delray Kruller seated on his Harley-Davidson looking young as [Aaron] had never seen him, long straggly dark hair and dark-tinted glasses and a cigarette in his mouth [j] and in the crook of his arm a blond girl, had to be Zoe looking young as a high school girl which was possibly what she’d been in that long-ago time before Krull was born. (*Bird* 314)

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<sup>10</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Marya*.

Aaron is glimpsing a world that existed before he was born, and this captivates him: he barely recognizes his mother in the image. For Aaron, who needs to come to terms with Zoe's death, the discovery of the photograph adds misery to his troubled state of mind, because the young girl from the image has been brutally murdered. Aaron has an ambiguous relationship with his mother due to his need to integrate his intimate familial bond to her with her public persona as the singer of a music band, as the next chapter describes.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this fascination of children is trying to find out how they have altered their parents' lives and how important they are to them. The fear of not being loved by one's parents, or not loved enough, is present throughout the corpus, mainly in *Expensive*, where Richard is mortified by his mother's abandonments; and in *Mulvaney's*, where the family disintegrates after the daughter is raped. In *Expensive*, the narrator's obsession about finding out if he is loved by his parents leads him to constantly spy on them. As we shall see, Richard's memoir attempts to discover his mother's true nature and to come to terms with her memory. In *Mulvaney's*, Patrick Mulvaney is also anguished about this:

The terrifying possibility came to Patrick: our lives are not our own but in the possession of others, our parents. Our lives are defined by the whims, caprices, cruelties of others. That genetic web, the ties of blood. It was the oldest curse, older than God. Am I loved? Am I wanted? Who will want me, if my parents don't? (*Mulvaney's* 233, emphasis in the original)

Patrick is consciously addressing here a primal fear: rejection, and the possibility of loneliness and loss derived from it. Families were initially created as a form of protection against harm, and thus it is terrifying to be excluded from that protection; as well as to be deprived from the feeling of belonging to the group. Furthermore, the "blood ties" bond people in different directions, and so, if children are conditioned by their parents' choices, parents are similarly conditioned by the decisions their children make. The quote refers as well to the question of possessiveness between parents and children, which will be analyzed in

the following chapters. Patrick Mulvaney's feelings in the previous quotation recall Jesse's anxiety in *Wonderland*: he is constantly rejected by his parental figures (specifically, father figures), which brings a great distress to him. He is absolutely dedicated to the kind of identity that Solomon describes as vertical, that is, to the traits that he has directly adopted from his parents, and this has tragic consequences, because he eventually develops a possessive attitude that provokes an enormous damage to his own relationship with his wife and his children. In fact, all these examples prove how the nature and quality of the parents' relationship within the mother-father subsystem does not only have an impact on their satisfaction with one another as partners and parents; but it is also significant for children, since a good relationship between parents provides a secure base for them (White and Woollett 5).

Finding these photographs, then, might have diverse effects. In the case of Swan, the photograph is a symbol of his questioning of his mother's past, which in time will lead to his wondering about himself; while for Aaron, it is a painful remainder of the unexpected loss of his mother. But it is in *Wonderland* that the impact of the parents' relationship on their children can be explored with special intensity since the novel offers a most complete panorama of the different stages leading to parenthood: it follows Jesse's progress from childhood, when he was mainly a son in search of a father, to adulthood, when he becomes a possessive father in search of a lost daughter. This development is possible thanks to his relationship with Helene first as a dating couple, then as a married one.

## **2.1 DATING COUPLES: HELENE AND JESSE IN *WONDERLAND***

The development of a stable relation with another adult often implies intimacy and mutuality, which usually requires an emotional compromise as well as a good communication. From an evolutionary point of view, the identity that has been constructed in adolescence makes an alliance with another identity, and they both share not only a daily-based relationship, but also a project for their future in common. And so, these adults have now common biographies instead of separate ones. A new evolutionary phase begins. Indeed, the access to the status of "adult" is defined by a series of psychological and social traits that

act as an indication, such as the intimacy of relationships defined by affective compromise, mutuality and stability (Palacios González 75-76).

Juliet and Brett from *Carthage* are a good example, at first, of how a couple plans their future together, because they exhibit good communication skills and a high level of compromise. They also spend quality time together and confide their feelings to each other. Besides, they know each other's families. Their adolescent identities have matured and solidified into a common project for the future: they plan to get married and have children. In this manner, they are creating a common biography. However, their plans never come true because Brett, influenced by George W. Bush government's campaign of propaganda in favor of attacking Iraq in 2003, voluntarily enlists in the army and is sent to the war. This decision does not only alter his whole life, but also eventually destroys his future plans with Juliet, and even their relationship. Additionally, it has an impact as well on the subsequent disappearance of Juliet's sister, Cressida, and results in his being accused of her manslaughter and imprisoned.

### **2.1.1 Control and Possessiveness**

In contrast with Juliet and Brett's relationship, which fails because of the interference of violence in it as a consequence of Brett's experiences in the war, Helene and Jesse in *Wonderland* develop from a dating couple to marriage and then to parenthood in a relationship always marked by Jesse's obsession with control and possessiveness. In fact, Jesse starts to show symptoms of this possessiveness with his first fiancée, Anne-Marie: he suspects that she has an affair with one of his friends, "Trick" Monk, and is terribly jealous about this highly implausible possibility. They eventually break up their engagement.

As we shall explain in more detail in the chapter "Children," Jesse's personal relationships are influenced by his obsession with achieving specific life-goals in order to compensate for his lack of a permanent parental figure in his life, as well as by the traumatic violence he has witnessed during the murder-suicide of his biological family. As a consequence, Jesse is extremely individualistic: he possesses an isolated ego (heavily criticized in the novel) who believes



itself omnipotent and is deaf to the voices of those around him (especially his daughter and wife) and to other realities that are not related to his interests (basically, his scientific profession). This tendency, linked to his obsession with control, makes Jesse's personal relationships extremely disturbed. He can only take his own personal goals into consideration: opening a private clinic, creating his own family and having a son.

When he meets Helene Cady, Jesse considers that she can be the perfect mother for his Self-Created Family System. Helene is the daughter of one of Jesse's teachers, an acclaimed and Nobel-prize winner doctor, Dr. Cady, whom Jesse greatly admires. Upon meeting her, Jesse feels attracted by "her still, intelligent, listening body" (*Wonderland* 245). This reference to her listening and still body hints at her submissiveness toward him: in fact, she will have children upon Jesse's insistence. From the beginning, Jesse's attitude toward her is tinged with possessiveness: significantly, when he takes her hand, his fingers move restlessly around the engagement ring he has given her.

Above all, Helene represents the beginning of a new life for Jesse, the most real possibility of stability that he has ever found. However, the communication between them is strained: Helene is reserved toward him; and Jesse never mentions his violent past to her, but only explains that his family has died in an accident instead of admitting that they had been killed in a murder-suicide. Jesse lies to her effortlessly, and this is another symptom of the separation and lack of communication that exists between the couple from the very beginning. As Daly argues, Jesse is censoring the memory of his biological family's death, and refusing to recognize its communal and tragic implications. Similarly, Jesse wants to block the realities of flesh, as we shall soon describe (57-58).

Helene's and Jesse's reserve does not mean that they do not appreciate and love each other, but their relationship is constructed more upon an abstract image of what they imagine a spouse to be (based on their gender prejudices and patriarchal assumptions about the nuclear family) than upon the real knowledge of their partner. Thus, when they visit an experimental farm where bloody studies with sheep are carried out, Jesse tries to shelter Helene from the cruel images that

they are witnessing although she shows no signs of distress. Jesse's appreciation of her being "so cool, so withdrawn, so independent of him" greatly bothers him (*Wonderland* 260), which suggests, as Daly points out, that Jesse does not want Helene to have her own independent thoughts (57). He struggles to form a mental image of his fiancée, or to make her fit his schemes. These efforts sharply contrast with Juliet and Brett's relationship during the first part of *Carthage*: they have a high level of acceptance, intimacy and compromise which is lacking in the formal and detached relationship of Helene and Jesse.

For Jesse, Helene is a convenient tool for his life-scheme to have a perfect family, since she has been taught that a woman must marry and have children. She becomes for him simply this: a perfect future wife/mother. Jesse will become almost an empty figure for Helene as well, a mere family role: "Her husband. He was a stranger to her [j] yet she was no stranger at all but her husband" (*Wonderland* 301). Both of them seem driven by idealized notions of the nuclear family. That is, they are unable to actually perceive their partner because they are expecting each other to enact a rigid role within the traditional family structure as father/husband and mother/wife, and they cannot observe any other side to each other's identity. As we shall see, Jesse expects Helene to blindly support and obey him; and Helene expects him to take control and make all the family's decisions. At the same time, they are locking themselves within these preconceived notions, especially Helene, who will see her whole identity reduced to this imposed role, as the next chapter, "Mothers," analyzes.

By trying to force the other into a specific role, they exhibit a certain role complementarity, because they fulfil role stereotypes for each other: they are both making use of each other. Jesse is looking after his own interests, while Helene is acting out of a sense of obligation. Their complementarity is of the negative kind: it halts the couple's anxieties for some time by fulfilling Jesse's goals and Helene's imposed goals, but it does not favor emotional growth, and eventually the distance between them increases.

In Helene and Jesse's relationship, we distinguish some of John Spiegel's theories about how a positive complementarity fails to be developed. First, cognitive discrepancy is present: Helene and Jesse do

not really know each other in a profound manner; and besides, their goals are opposed, even if they never discuss such matters and, in the end, Helene gives in to Jesse: Jesse wants children and Helene does not; and they have divergent points of view upon Jesse's career. Thus, as we shall see, the subsystem formed by Helene and Jesse qualifies as a rigid subsystem, because it does not allow the free expression of their members or considers or allows an open negotiation. As noted, the communication of the couple is rather poor.

One of the most outstanding traits of Helene and Jesse's relationship is their conflictive relationship with the body: both their own and that of the other sex. The next section analyzes this singularity.

### **2.1.2 Helene, Jesse and the Body**

The perception that Jesse has of the human body is determinant when explaining his approach to life, and his relationships with his wife, family and society. To Jesse, the body is just a scientific object, a kind of machine that he tries to completely fix and control by means of his mind; hence his messianic attitude and his obsession with death as an entity that threatens or denies that capacity of mind domination over the body. As Friedman remembers, Monk correctly accuses Jesse of wanting to become a neurosurgeon in order to isolate himself from humanity by becoming Christ the healer; but he fails because he cannot cure everyone (*Joyce* 106). This is tragically proved by the death of his daughter Shelley.

Jesse's limited conception of the human body leads him to despise the body as inferior to the mind. He establishes an absolute dichotomy between mind and body, ignoring the interdependence of both entities and trying to subordinate the body to the mind: it is the mind (in his case, a scientific mind) the one that controls the body (not only Jesse's own body, but also the bodies of others, represented by his patients and family). As a result, Jesse often engages in domineering and exploitative relationships to others (particularly, to women): he is unable to maintain egalitarian relationships with others because he feels the need to impose his will on everyone.

In this manner, Jesse's obsession with control is translated in terms of the relationship mind/body: he is the mind that should keep the body

(his own and others' bodies, including those of his family members) under control in order to avoid adversities. This approach is dependent on the obliteration or erasure of all those corporal aspects that escape from the control of the mind: involuntary actions (such as the production of sweat, or even vital procedures like the flowing of blood), impulses and instincts (such as sexual arousal). Jesse then tries to keep his body impulses under the control of his mind by resisting or denying them. Jesse's dislike of the body's natural functions is noticed, again, by the perceptive Monk,<sup>11</sup> who claims sarcastically that Jesse "wants to do only good and to save people, he doesn't want to stick his nose in anybody's mucus—but still he's planning a family" (*Wonderland* 274).

This brings Jesse to deny as well the emotions and feelings that humans associate with such impulses (such as his lust for Reva Denk). This is lined to his rejection of blood; that is, his adherence to bloodlessness. Blood flows, and there is no brain or human mind able to stop it. Blood is a part of the human body, but literally and metaphorically, it is related to the impulses and instincts that Jesse tries to dominate: blood is the body in fluid form, and blood is sexuality too; as well as being directly associated to female sexuality. As we shall see, blood will play a central role in Jesse's frustrated affair with Reva.

This despise for the body is a common feature in Western ideology, but the body is usually opposed to the soul or the spirit instead of the mind. This makes Jesse's attitude slightly different from the common one. The despise of the body in favor of the soul or the spirit often has moral overtones, as Mikhail Bakhtin brilliantly argues in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," collected in *The Dialogic Imagination* (published in 1975), when discussing humans' tendency to sublimate or spiritualize the body by degrading natural body activities which are essential for survival: eating, defecating, sexuality, etc. In short, Jesse's despise of the body, blood, and body relationships is attributed to his need to keep everything under control: specifically, the body needs to be under the control of the mind.

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<sup>11</sup> Monk, with his ability to tell unpleasant truths in a blunt, humorous or light manner, reminds of a jester, as seen when accurately describing Jesse. As Bender indicates, he lives up to his name "Trick" Monk: he is a clown and a trickster (56).

Jesse's attitude toward the body and his way of approaching others appear to be partly derived from the influence of a series of father figures in his life. One of the most notorious notions, partly inherited from his stepfather Dr. Pedersen, and that serves to understand Jesse's mental processes, is the existence of a single truth. Following Bakhtin, Daly describes Jesse's mind as monologic.<sup>12</sup> Daly argues that monologic consciousness considers that human beings are born of men, and not women (a question to be further explored in the chapter "Mothers"), forgetting thus the body. This represents an ascription to the Law of the Father,<sup>13</sup> which is a disembodied voice that uses women as the building material of their culture. Jesse's initiation into a social order governed by this kind of monological consciousness is violent,

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<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin considered that language always articulates a particular view of the world. He argued that the early societies were characterized by monoglossia: a stable, unified language. Instead, heteroglossia refers to the conflict between centripetal, official discourses and centrifugal, unofficial discourses within the same national language. The discursive site in which the conflict between several voices is most concentrated is the modern novel. In novels, heteroglossia can be represented, for instance, by a hybrid construction containing the trace of two or more discourses, either the narrator and one or several characters or simply the characters. Heteroglossia foregrounds the clash of antagonistic social forces (Roberts 248-249). In Bakhtin's words, "[h]eteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel [...] is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they [j] know about each other [j] it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other" (324, emphasis in the original). In summary, monologism tries to impose a single, one-sided, monolithic truth.

<sup>13</sup> The Law of the Father is a concept by Jacques Lacan whose origin is found in the idea that the human subject is structured in and by language. The human subject and the sexual identity are produced simultaneously in the moment in which a person enters in the symbolic order of language. Lacan argues that the reduction of the sexual difference to the presence or absence of the phallus is a symbolic law produced by patriarchy: the Law of the Father. Lacan considers patriarchy a system of universal power, and defends the primacy of the phallus as the only human emblem necessary to maintain the preeminence of the father as a Father, who is considered (precisely due to his possession of a penis) the origin and representative of culture and the law, and the one who provides access to language. The phallus becomes the greater signifier, the one who governs all others and grants the human being access to culture. Lacan also argues that there is only one libido: the male libido. Lacan's arguments have received innumerable critiques: the theory of the eternal necessary patriarchy by which he justifies the primacy of the phallus is nowadays outdated (Badinter 167-168).

for he is almost sacrificed by his biological father. In time, as we shall see, he will victimize others (51, 55).

According to Daly, Oates portrays Jesse's monologic yearning as a quest for a father figure that is manifested in a collective deification of science. Scientists, like Jesse, are presumably objective, and Jesse has a similar tendency to refuse to recognize doubts or confusion: he remains rigidly self-contained, making science his "single truth," while worshiping a series of scientists (Dr. Pedersen, Dr. Cady and Dr. Perrault). In Jesse's case, this education implies that the mind, narrowly defined as individual (that is, as an isolated ego) denies the wisdom of the body (55).

Consequently, Jesse only learns and speaks one language, that of science, and, applying Luce Irigaray's vision on the subject, this is extremely significant. According to Schwab, in *To Speak Is Never Neutral* (1985), Irigaray describes science not as a dialogue or interrogation of facts but as an imposition of an ideology on data which is not neutral either, because it depends on certain choices to be made that are inevitably political and gendered. Irigaray urges science to study its own image in an exercise of self-reflection, in order to discover cracks in a mirror which supposedly reflects reality (Schwab 64). As Ken Hirschkop argues, science is the paradigm of monologism; that is, a strategy of response toward another discourse which aims to ignore or marginalize the opposite discourse (qtd. in Schwab 64). As Schwab concludes, scientific discourse tries to deny the voice of gender, class, race and difference and to pretend that they do not exist; or at least, that they are inappropriate to scientific inquiry. By assuming a position of naturalness, of neutrality, it subsumes the Other into the Same (Schwab 64-65). The Same is an Irigarayan concept which refers to patriarchy; that is, the realm of the same, which does not recognize sexual difference and prevents self-love in women (Whitford 18).

This is what Jesse does, along with the other fathers in the novel: they try to silence the voices of the Other, and even to downplay its existence. Jesse seems to have learnt this, mostly, from his fathers. More specifically, from his biological father Willard, Jesse adopts a pull for a misogynist control of women. From Dr. Pedersen, he also absorbs a need for dominating others; and, when becoming a medicine doctor

like him, Jesse assimilates his messianic tendencies and a wish to save the whole world, following Dr. Pedersen's belief that to die is to surrender, which means that Jesse cannot accept death. Jesse thus becomes obsessed with control, especially of the body. Moreover, Dr. Pedersen implants in Jesse a horror of germs and an obsession with pureness and cleanness translated in a mania with washing the body: this may have influenced Jesse's rejection of the natural bodily functions by making him perceive the body as basically dirty. Furthermore, from his father-in-law Dr. Cady (who is not exactly a father figure for Jesse, but still a heavy influence upon him), he absorbs the belief that the body is a machine, which Jesse strives to totally control. Finally, from his mentor Dr. Perrault, he learns that personalities are unstable, and the preponderance of the brain. These sequence of father-figures is mostly introduced in the first part of the book, "Variations of an American Dream," a title that appears to allude to the multiple philosophies that the protagonist is introduced to.

Therefore, Jesse wants to control his body just as he tries to control his family, with an iron determination. Along with this, he does not often pay attention or follow the impulses and drives of his own body. Besides, all the mentioned characters, especially Willard, Dr. Pedersen and Dr. Perrault, also hold highly misogynistic attitudes which Jesse will also reflect.

The origins of misogyny, Burr explains, can be found in men's anxiety to be certain of their masculinity. In order to attain this, they devise ways to ensure that masculinity and femininity are clearly distinguishable and cannot be confused, and so they get rid of any sign of femininity they might have. This fear is certainly homophobic, and it has given rise to the polarization of body characteristics (e.g., masculine bodies are angular, feminine ones are soft). After this separation is achieved, femininity comes to be located in women, who thus become a threat to masculine identity, and so they must be constantly supervised and controlled (111). And so, boys are encouraged to repress any societally defined feminine characteristic they may have (Arrighi 175). For instance, in *Garden*, the child Swan is taught that women and men belong to different domains, and although he wishes to sit with women during family gatherings, he does

not dare to do so because “it would not look right” in his stepfather’s eyes (*Garden* 328). As D. B. Lynn claims, boys learn to be men primarily through learning not to be women, whereas girls can learn directly how to be women by observing readily available female role models (qtd. in Herek 76). This does not mean that women can easily find these models, as we shall see in the next chapter.

As Snider adds,

[t]he heavy misogyny found in male identity formation is too widespread, culturally and historically, to be wholly accidental. Blatant rejection of femininity and an exaggeration of male-female differences is a primary component of virtually every known male subculture (including those among gay men) [j] But there is no reason to suppose that the need to create identities that are distinctively different from women’s implies a need to hate, devalue, or dominate women. The latter are necessary components of patriarchy, not masculinity. (Snider 167)

The corpus proves that misogyny is learnt both at home and in larger social groups, where as Rich argues, boys are taught to hate and scorn the places in themselves where they identify with women (xxxvi). As a teenager, Jesse witnesses misogynistic comments and behaviors at home from, for instance, his stepfather Dr. Pedersen: “Women cannot concentrate. Even gifted women, even women singled out for exceptional histories, cannot concentrate. Is this why they are so charming?” (*Wonderland* 107). When his daughter Hilda protests alleging that she can concentrate, he answers that even her, with her enormous talent, must be disciplined. This paternalistic attitude is extended towards his wife, to whom he is both patronizing and psychologically abusive.

Therefore, Jesse is taught that women are inferior to men, often incapable of an intellectual capacity that measures up to that of men; and that they are essentially charming creatures that must be admired for their beauty:



The females seemed to Jesse mere lovely animal life [ ] and he, Jesse Pedersen, a point of scrutiny inside the field of their movement, an intelligence to give direction to their energy, sharing in the incidental touch of their flesh by the men. Their skin was so tender, so sweet, it might be stretched out seamlessly for hundreds of yards, lacking identity, belonging to any of them] (*Wonderland* 164-165)

He associates women to animals, a comparison that also renders the inequality between men and women: if women are like animals, they are inferior and wild beings that have to be tamed, taught, and even owned by a male.

But as Snider concludes,

[i]t should, it *must* be possible to find ways of being manly that are not misogynous and do not require the repression of every human emotion except anger. It should not be necessary to denigrate male sexuality or insist that it be denied to address misogyny or assault, but it is essential to differentiate the sex drive from the need to dominate. To understand the limits as well as the potential for change it is useful to examine the decline and fall of traditional male spheres of action. (165, emphasis in the original)

Jesse indeed associates his sex drive to his need to dominate women, especially, when he lusts for Reva Denk but at the same time often visualizes himself hurting her.

His wish to separate from women makes him perceive them as the Other: “women were always surprises, anything could come out of their bodies]” (*Wonderland* 316). According to Daly (57), Jesse fears women because he is afraid of losing his power inside of their bodies, which he perceives as “a socket of pure power that would suck him into it and charge him with its strength—asking nothing of him but the surrender and collapse of all of his bones, the blacking-out of his consciousness” (*Wonderland* 229).

As anticipated, Jesse does not listen to the voices of others, particularly, of women. This refusal is conveyed in *Wonderland* by

means of two pictures that Jesse sees scribbled on public toilets. The first drawing, seen at the beginning of the novel, has been made by two persons with different markers. The first artist has drawn a woman's body seen from the bottom up, with spread legs and a head as "small as a pea" (*Wonderland* 35-36). The second artist has superimposed a closed box that resembles a building over the body of a woman and has shaded the space between the legs in the form of a rectangle resembling a door.

In Daly's opinion, in the first picture, the size of the head is a sort of revenge upon the power of woman's wombs. It portrays the body from outside, aggressively, distorting it: the body becomes males' building material, and it is denied a voice. The second artist, by superimposing a building over the woman, establishes himself as woman's architect; and (as in the case of the first artist) her body as his building material, his property. Jesse considers the pictures nightmarish, and thinks that one could become lost into that black space between the woman's legs, which according to Daly indicates Jesse's fear of women. In time, Jesse will master this fear, like the artist of the superimposed picture (51). Besides, the second picture includes a door in the place of the womb that appears to grant access to a new dimension, as we shall soon explain. The second picture from the toilet, seen by an adult Jesse, is a womb drawn with a tiny eye at its center. According to Daly, the artist has placed the "I" within the womb, which may be interpreted as Jesse seeking control over the womb, as many other fathers of this novel do (66). Indeed, Jesse tries to inscribe himself in the bodies of the women he relates with: Helene, Reva and Shelley.

As Daly explains, Jesse eventually learns to master his fear of women's bodies: the first toilet picture distorts the female body and makes a property claim over it; similarly, Jesse transforms his fear into entitlement by considering himself superior to women. As a result, Jesse's relationship with Helene can be summarized in the following words, which evoke his medical profession: for him, his wife has "[c]ool, smooth flesh. It was subordinate to him, and yet separate from him" (*Wonderland* 420). Jesse will live with her as her husband and even have two daughters with her, but as we shall see he never considers

Helene his equal: he shares the traditional association of women to nature that reduces them to their biological capacity for giving birth.

Therefore, Jesse cannot form a deep bond to his wife, despite the fact that he initially tries to do so. Part of this wish for connection is rather egoistical, and stems from his need for assistance in infusing meaning into his life. As we will repeatedly notice, Jesse finds enormous difficulties when constructing his personality and when trying to assume his past traumatic experiences. Considering that he cannot confront these issues on his own, he relies on others to help him to overcome his traumas and construct his identity. This contrasts with his future attitude of autonomy from others: we could assert that he takes advantage of them in times of need. In this particular case, he searches in other people the language that he needs to make sense of his tragic past. Particularly, Jesse expects to find in his wife (and later on, in Reva)

the exact words that would explain his life. But he did not know them. He used words shyly, crudely. It remained for someone else—a woman, perhaps—to draw these sacred words out of him, to justify him, redeem him as Jesse—he could not create them himself. Not alone. (*Wonderland* 370)

However, Jesse's verbal communication with Helene is so poor that this strategy fails. He concludes that he has married "a kind of silence" (*Wonderland* 370), not realizing that he also has a role in that silence, because his communicative skills are very limited too. In any case, the only means that he finds of connecting with her is at a physical level by means of sex: he feels that Helene's body hides "the secret of the world" (*Wonderland* 312). This brings to mind the first toilet picture that depicted a door in the place of the womb, which represents Jesse's hope of accessing a new dimension in the bodies of women that could bring language, and subsequently, meaning, to his life.

Nevertheless, Jesse is unable to find that meaning in marital sexual relationships; possibly because he is unable to establish a true dialogue to others but always tries to impose his will: he regards Helene as inferior to him, simply as a being with the capacity of engendering his

children. Besides, Helene has an extremely troubled relationship with her body which does not certainly facilitate this communication. Therefore, Jesse's hope of finding in women the language he yearns for seems extremely misguided and wishful because she considers them inferior to him.

The explanation for Jesse's attempt to find meaning and words to express himself in the bodies of women may be found in Shapiro, who explains that since feelings are considered to belong within the female sphere, they must be rejected by men, who are expected to behave in a stereotypical manner to feel more confident of their own masculinity. Since men are expected to be in charge and control and thus deal with any kind of problem, they avoid being emotionally open, just in case they need to place their emotions aside in order to solve specific problems that require this attitude. As a result, they function in a manner that protects them from their own vulnerability by not letting their emotions free flow interfere. Due to this, many men have not learnt how to deal with their feelings, how to identify, share, understand and work with them. In contrast, men are authorized to have sex, and this becomes the only terrain in which free emotional expression is considered appropriate, because culturally, sex is men's arena (Shapiro 148-150, 152-154).

Summarizing, on the one hand, we can assert that Jesse's monologic attitude, linked to his misogynistic view of women, his aloof relationship with the body, and his messianic attitude as a doctor, makes him generally cold and detached in his relationships to others, most particularly women. On the other hand, Helene also has a distant relationship with her body, which shall be explored in the chapter "Mothers." Helene's bond with her late mother was not too close, and she has not learnt from her how to have a natural connection with her body, so she feels revulsion for her female body, as if it were alien to her. At the same time, she contemplates her destiny as a woman as closely linked to her reproductive capacity, feeling forced to become a wife and a mother. According to Deborah Clarke, the real function for women under patriarchy is "to become a womb to bring forth men children" (qtd. in Porter 193). In short, "[t]he experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male

interests; behavior which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism, is considered deviant or criminal” (Rich 42).

Thus, despite strongly resenting her subordination, Helene lets society, particularly in the form of men like her husband or her father, define her, to the alarming extent that she is reduced to be a mother/wife with little alternative identity traits. As we shall show, when Helene cannot continue to be a fully dedicated mother, she feels that she has lost her identity.

### **2.1.3 The Foundations of Helene and Jesse’s Marriage**

We shall now analyze how Helene and Jesse’s intimate relationship evolves into marriage. Helene and Jesse decide to marry before the planned date after a disturbing incident with their mutual friend Monk. The importance of Monk in the lives of the characters and in the context of the novel deserves its own analysis: he is Jesse’s double, and as such, he highlights certain traits of his personality.

Talbot Waller Monk, known as “Trick,” is a doctor as well as an instructor in Dr. Cady’s course of neurochemistry at Jesse’s medical school. Besides, he writes poetry and in time will abandon his career in medicine and become a famous counterculture poet. Monk is spontaneous, irreverent, honest and observant. Besides, he feels sexually attracted by Jesse although he never directly acknowledges this: instead, he pretends to love Helene.

Monk warns Helene about Jesse’s voracious nature and selfish inclinations, informing her that Jesse has “abstract and criminal” plans for the future (*Wonderland* 274); and that he wants her to bear several children for him. That is, Monk is warning Helene that Jesse plans to use her as a tool to fulfill his plans of having a perfect family, and of his potentiality for violence (which will eventually be manifested in his fixation for his daughter Shelley).

Monk functions in the novel as Jesse’s doppelgänger or double. Beckson and Ganz (66-67) define the double as a literary device by which a character is self-duplicated (the Doppelgänger, “mirror image” or “alter ego”); or divided into two distinct and often antithetical personalities, which intensifies the inner struggle of good against evil. Masao Miyoshi, in *The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of*

*the Victorians* (1969), divides the double into three categories: the formal (or the author's conscious use of the device to express the theme of a work), the thematic or ideological (a philosophical view of self-alienation argued through divided characters), and the biographical (which reveals the author's own unconscious divisions). These categories are formal, and not mutually exclusive. The double was widely used in nineteenth and twentieth century literature, suggesting the increasing awareness that the self is actually composed by many selves. Oates's doppelgängers are placed between Miyoshi's formal and thematic categories, because they consciously express certain concerns of each of the characters (mainly related to unresolved inner contradictions or traumas), whereas in many other occasions they express the alienation of these characters (qtd. in Beckson and Ganz 67).

In *Wonderland*, Monk and Jesse are antithetical in several manners: Monk represents romantic poetry, whereas Jesse embodies science (Daly 50). Moreover, according to Creighton, Monk counters Jesse's dedication to life with a death wish: Jesse adulates health while Monk adulates cancer in one of his poems (*Novels Middle* 70). Both Monk and Jesse have a complex relationship with the body, especially women's bodies. Jesse keeps his distance from the female body out of fear and despise of women, and Monk out of sexual dislike of them.

Monk plays a central role in the couple's decision to anticipate their wedding. When he learns that they are moving to another state, he becomes desperate and sends them ambiguous letters in which he appears to confess his love for Helene, but which can be interpreted as referring to Jesse, his real love interest. After sending the letters, Monk asks Helene and Jesse to have dinner with him, and reveals his desolation upon their departure, reading some of his poetry to them. One of the poems contains an excerpt which seems to foreshadow the fate of Helene and Jesse's union:

*we are helpless as the meeting of two blank  
hot walls of air  
or two lovers pressed together  
in perpetual daylight. (Wonderland 271, emphasis in the  
original)*

Like these helpless lovers, Jesse and Helene cannot find meaning and fulfilment in the apparent bliss of their intimate relationship. At the same time, these lines insinuate that there is no room for anybody else (in this case, for Monk himself) within the intimacy of a couple that is “pressed together.”

Thus, now that Helene and Jesse are going to marry, Monk feels that there shall be no space for him in their lives, because, as he says, “[p]eople in love do not need anyone else to complete them [j] They only acquiesce to their friends out of charity” (*Wonderland* 270, emphasis in the original). In fact, as we shall see, Jesse and Helene will grow increasingly isolated, not only from others, but also within their own marriage. This is yet another instance of the rigidity of their subsystem: they have close boundaries with the rest of the world.

Jesse is unable to make any sense of the poems, since art is totally alien to him: he has a monologic mind, in his case totally grounded in scientific, objective and measurable realities. After the dinner, the couple has an argument with Monk when he confesses that he has eaten a broiled piece of a human womb from a corpse of the cadaver room, adding that he has done so while thinking of Helene. This has several implications.

First, along with food (a topic soon to be analyzed), devouring is one of the central tropes of the novel. In this case, it is linked to instinctive basic fears of being eaten and represents a powerful metaphor of appropriation, dissatisfaction, frustration, jealousy and possessiveness. The image of characters consuming one another is common in *Wonderland*, as Johnson perceives (*Understanding* 134). Both Hilda Pedersen and Shelley Vogel accuse their fathers of wanting to eat them. Indeed, Dr. Pedersen is one of the most voracious figures of the book, both literally and metaphorically, along with Willard Harte: they both claim total control over their families, in the most brutal expression of patriarchal prerogatives as the male heads of their nuclear families. Jesse, on his part, is horrified to discover at the end of the novel that he has inherited this voracious trait in himself, represented by his obsession with Shelley. Apart from these metaphorical images of devouring, Monk’s eating a womb is the most literal image of

consumption of the novel, which brings to mind male's patriarchal control of female's reproductive capacities.

Second, Monk's revelation is highly significant since it may be argued that this identification of Helene with the womb is an act of resentment for her relationship to Jesse; or that, by eating female reproductive organs that remind him of Helene, he might be putting himself in her place by acquiring her genitals, and thus gaining, indirectly, access to Jesse. In sum, the scene reduces Helene to her reproductive capacity, represented by her being contemplated as a womb; and this is precisely how Jesse perceives her most of the time. As Daly comments on, Monk's confession of cannibalism causes Jesse's rage, but Monk is merely voicing Jesse's view of women's bodies; and as Helene soon learns (and Monk has already warned her), marrying Jesse implies feeling reduced to her reproductive organs, because he does not think that she has a consciousness of her own (59).

As we shall see, Oates frequently emphasizes the importance of constantly contemplating and perceiving the beloved person: that is, perceiving all her/his sides and accepting the changes that she/he undergoes. But Jesse, like Dr. Cady, does not really see Helene: "[s]he floated between them, her father and her husband. They seemed to have no real consciousness of her except as a point of contact, an object, a beloved object" (*Wonderland* 281). For these men, she is not an individual person with a certain unique personality but simply a daughter, a wife, a mother: an abstract role that she fulfils. They look at her through the lenses of their own prejudices.

This is proved by the physical fight that ensues between Jesse and Monk after his revelation of cannibalism. The confrontation (mostly prompted by Monk, who keeps taunting Jesse to fight him) shakes both Jesse and Helene, and makes them see each other under a new light: Helene takes pity upon Jesse's panic and worry; and Jesse marvels at her new "docility" and physical proximity to him in public. Helene is finally fulfilling Jesse's expectations of submissiveness and sensitivity, whose absence had often worried him. He definitely welcomes this new perception of his fiancée. On her part, Helene seems to be voicing the guidelines she has learnt, as a wife-to-be, about becoming an unconditional support for her male partner. Therefore, marriage is



presented here as the culmination of a process of role-acquisition as members of the traditional nuclear family, a situation that leads them to move the date of the wedding forward.

The fight between Monk and Jesse becomes a turning point for the couple, as well as for Jesse, whom, according to Grant, after almost killing Monk, is shattered by the power of one person over life and death (57). This episode, thus, gives the couple a new sense of understanding and dependence; and brings them so close that they decide to move their wedding date forward. But this is just a fleeting understanding, since it is based on prejudices and abstractions instead of an accurate vision of each other.

## **2.2 WIFE-HUSBAND RELATIONSHIPS**

In order to introduce the discussion of Helene and Jesse as a married couple, we shall first present some theoretical concepts in order to classify the different traits of marriages. Afterward, we shall see their incidence in the corpus; and finally, we shall continue with the examination of Helene and Jesse's bond.

### **2.2.1 Marriage Patterns**

Despite the increased predominance of cohabitation, most research in commitment relationships is centered on marriage. Francesca Cancian (qtd. in Brannon 230) sets several patterns of marriage, which she calls the companionship, independence, and interdependence blueprints. The companionship blueprint was the model for most marriages in the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s. These partners often have well-defined and separate gender-roles, and women are held responsible for maintaining the love relationship. Nowadays, this type of marriage is considered traditional because it resists women's self-development. The independence blueprint appeared during the 1960s, a period which emphasized personal freedom and change. The women's movement, along with increases in paid employment for women, led to an examination of the ground rules for relationships, and so both women and men came to believe that marriage should be a partnership of equals. This model emphasizes self-development over commitment and obligations, because it holds the

view that relationships are the meeting of two independent individuals. This emphasis on self-development resulted in less defined gender-roles. The interdependence is an alternative to the independence blueprint. It also includes flexible gender roles, but maintains a commitment based on mutual dependence. Cancian argues that self-development and interdependence are compatible goals for relationships, and that partners are always dependent on each other in marriage. Both the companionship and independence blueprints ignore this interdependence.

Robert J. Sternberg (qtd. in Brannon 230-231) proposes a triangular model of love, which can be used to explain these different blueprints as differing in the three components of intimacy, passion and commitment. Companionship marriages have the three components, but in unequal proportion. Under this blueprint, women seek more intimacy than men, and this produces an unequal balance between such partners. As Cancian asserted, the independence marriage lacks the component of commitment, whereas interdependent marriages should fit what Sternberg calls “consummated love,” that is, the equal balance of all three components.

The companionship marriage is represented by Clara and Revere in *Garden*, who get married at the beginning of the 1940s. As we shall explain in the chapter “Mothers,” Clara uses marriage to the wealthy Revere to obtain a legitimate father and a surname for his out-of-wedlock son. Clara and Revere have separate and clearly-defined gender-roles: Revere takes care of the family business while Clara stays at home. She is also apparently responsible for maintaining the love relationship, but she does not really love Revere and performs this task out of a sense of duty keeping up with her role of a loving wife, traditionally defined as a comfort to the husband within the private sphere. Revere himself is not a person who openly expresses his emotions (although he clearly loves Clara), and Clara is troubled when he does, for instance, confess that he has missed her during his trips:

she felt uncomfortable when he confessed these things, [j] because she had no real interest in the private side of this public man’s life. [...] What she felt for Revere was confused on one side with his boys and this house, and on

the other side with the man whose name was so well known and who could never be a private, intimate human being, but only a person committed eternally to fulfill his name. (*Garden* 298)

Therefore, Clara has no real interest in the man behind the public, wealthy and well-known town figure. The reference to “fulfilling his name” alludes to her view of him as the surname of a wealthy family; and as a surname for her child, which gives him access to a higher social status. Nonetheless, she performs her role as a loving wife, by for example, turning her face “so that he could kiss her mouth, not because she wanted him to but because it had to be done” (*Garden* 299). Therefore, in Sternberg’s terms, we detect a commitment which acquires different dimensions for this couple: Revere actually loves Clara and is devoted to her; while she accepts his tokens of love and offers some of her own because she is his wife and feels compelled to do such tasks. Consequently, passion and intimacy acquire different meanings for both of them.

On the light of Clara’s detached attitude, it is relevant to point out that according to Brannon (and contrary to the popular expectation), men have more traditional ideas about love and marriage and are more romantic than women. Therefore, after years of marriage, husbands are more likely to hold conservative views about gender roles. For instance, men are more likely to hold romantic beliefs such as “Love lasts forever” and “There is one perfect love in the world for everyone” (232). This is also present in *Bird*, where Edward Diehl seems to hold the view that “love lasts forever,” and thus strives to come back to his wife despite her rejection, motivated by his marital infidelity and his status as a suspect of murder. Delray Kruller also manifests deep romantic feelings for his late wife Zoe. However, both Lucille and Zoe are able to break the bond with their husbands and continue with their lives in an independent manner.

The most rigid example of a companionship marriage is found in *Wonderland*, where Dr. Pedersen and Mrs. Pedersen have rigid and separate roles both in the public and private spheres. Besides, Dr. Pedersen is a ruthless head of the household that exerts psychological violence over his wife, as explained in the next chapter, so that the

components of passion and intimacy are at their greatest imbalance in here. Commitment does neither appear in balanced terms, since Mrs. Pedersen wishes to abandon her husband but he prevents her from doing so.

The independence blueprint is perfectly manifested in Nada and Elwood's marriage in *Expensive*. Curiously, in Richard's opinion, Nada married Elwood mainly for economic reasons, like Clara:

She had married Father the way a girl goes on a date with a man she does not at all like, or even know, simply because he will take her to a special event where the very lights and the very sweetness of the flowers set everywhere make up a world—no people are really needed. (*Expensive* 33)

Richard also wonders whether Nada really loved Elwood; but the reader is never to know. In any case, we perceive through the narrator's eyes how the mother's struggle for independence is manifested in periodically abandoning her husband and son. Significantly, the main action takes place during the 1960s, a decade of convulsing changes in society. Nada is almost exclusively compromised with her own freedom, becoming one of those women who fought to attain a more egalitarian type of marriage. Elwood does not approve of his wife's quest for independence:

Women in this country [j] are all trying to be like Natashya, and Natashya has succeeded, oh yes, she has succeeded, she has everything she wants and then doesn't want it, she doesn't know what she wants, she never does any work [...] even though she was living in a room with a hotplate and cockroaches when I found her. (*Expensive* 94-95)

It is interesting to notice the derisive terms that Elwood uses, and the diminishing and objectifying vocabulary that he chooses to refer to his wife by asserting that he "found" her, turning her into an object. Elwood is right to a certain degree, though, when he asserts that his wife does not seem to know what she really wants, as we shall explain. This might

be a consequence of the innovative path that she is walking as a mother who wishes to keep her own independence; or of her own consumerist self-absorption.

Therefore, Elwood and Nada often fight over their conflictive goals. Their marriage undergoes a series of cycles in which they have an argument and subsequently reconcile. As it usually occurs in independence marriages, the commitment component is missing, at least on Nada's part. Intimacy and passion are not uniformly manifested, and appear exclusively when the couple goes through a reconciliation phase.

The interdependence marriage is represented by Arlette and Zeno Mayfield from *Carthage*, in the twenty-first century; a time when gender-roles are much more flexible than in previously commented models of marriage. The Mayfields have a better balance between commitment and self-development: they possess a kind of "consummated love," that is, the equal balance of all three components of intimacy, passion and commitment. Perhaps this balance is not perfect, since Cancian's assertion of the possibility of balancing mutual dependency and self-assertion appears somewhat problematic: the very notion of the existence of a perfect balance does not seem too plausible. In this case, the Mayfields are a good instance of consummated love, at least until their daughter disappears. After that, they find diverse manners to confront her loss, and in the end, they separate, although they do so on good terms and afterward maintain a cordial relationship.

Contemporary marriages may follow any of these blueprints. A study on the expectations of marriage by Darla R. Botkin, M. O'Neal Weeks and Jeanette E. Morris from the year 2000 discovered that there have been changes in women's conceptualization of marriage (qtd. in Brannon 231). Between the 1960s and the 1970s, there was a large shift toward beliefs in egalitarian marriages. After the 1970s, these beliefs persisted. However, as Brannon concludes (238), there are still unbalances of power in marriages, which tend to persist through time. In these cases, traditional gender roles dictate that the man will be the leader and head of the household. The most contemporary marriage of the corpus is found in *Carthage*, which as we have just suggested presents traits of an interdependence marriage.

Once this classification has been discussed, we shall continue to describe Helene and Jesse's relationship, in their married phase, by taking into account the marriage type in which they are inscribed.

### **2.2.2 Helene and Jesse's Marriage**

Helene and Jesse marry during the 1950s, and their marriage fits the typical blueprint pattern of the era: the companionship blueprint. Although Helene is at the beginning not totally constricted to the private sphere (she has a degree, as well as a job); after she has children, she leaves her job and devotes her time to taking care of them. This contrasts with her personal aims, for she had not wished to have children. The relationship between Helene and Jesse is then not based upon equal grounds: in their marriage, the only goals that are considered are those of Jesse, whereas Helene's opinion is mostly ignored. Thus, Jesse's opening of a clinic becomes a priority, even if Helene is not convinced about it.

Helene and Jesse's marriage is originally built upon the sudden understanding that they felt after the fight with Monk, but this understanding is just momentary and apparent. In fact, while married they keep on having the same courteous, rigid, formal, uncommunicative and distant relationship that they had as an unmarried couple.

As newly-weds recently arrived in Chicago, Jesse works as a doctor at a hospital, while Helene has a part-time job in the chemistry department at the University of Chicago. Helene takes money from her father but does not inform Jesse about it; instead, she lies about the amount of her salary, pretending to earn more than she does. Possibly, she feels that Jesse would feel inferior or offended to accept money from his father-in-law, since he is supposed to provide for his family and to keep all familial problems confined to the family circle.

Helene gradually starts to realize that she is basically an object for her husband, while at the same time she grows increasingly dissatisfied with her present life: she feels lonely and embittered about Jesse's long working hours, but never mentions it to him. Their communication is still extremely poor, and Jesse feels so exhausted by his work that he is unable to display emotions when he is finally at home with his wife,

even if he tries to do so. Moreover, they never argue, possibly because they do not really communicate. Thus, they do not discuss questions that in short affect the whole family, such as Jesse's professional career. Jesse is the one who makes decisions, and Helene complies to them.

Jesse is only able to appreciate Helene for her body and her reproductive capacity. When he imagines her, he visualizes her body in a superficial manner. He realizes that she silently reproaches him for not knowing her better, but is incapable of proceeding beyond the recognition of her physical traits.

As mentioned, it seems that, on the one hand, Jesse can only conceive relating to a woman by means of her body. Jesse perceives women either as objects of pleasure (Reva) or tools of reproduction (Helene). This is motivated by the misogynistic culture in which Jesse is immersed. On the other hand, Helene has apparently never enjoyed sex with her husband but merely considered it her wifely duty.

Thus, given both Helene's and Jesse's feelings of despise for the body, their marital sexual relationships are increasingly infrequent and awkward. Jesse, however, is grateful that his wife has become pregnant "for him" (*Wonderland* 305). He perceives to what extent pregnancy is a burden for her, not only physically but also psychologically; but his worries, nonetheless, are always focused on the fear of being abandoned by her or not having the child, not on Helene herself: "he must get her through this pregnancy, he must prevent her from escaping him]" (*Wonderland* 311). Once more we detect Jesse's constant anxiety about being left alone, as well as the fact that considers his wife a mere reproductive tool.

After the couple has two daughters, Jeanne and Shelley, Jesse increasingly distances himself from the family, especially from his wife:

He only appeared to be in this room with [Helene], speaking to her as a husband to his wife; really he was elsewhere. His presence here was a lie. If his mind cast itself about in this house, exploring his possessions, it would only assure himself of their existing, bluntly and coarsely, without spirit: a wife, a daughter, another daughter. (*Wonderland* 434)

Significantly, Jesse considers his whole family a possession, alike to furniture or the very house they inhabit. Being the father/husband, Jesse is the head of the family and his decisions should be considered a kind of law for the other (female) members of the Vogel family, something that Helene and Shelley are well aware of.

Helene and Jesse are presented here as a clear example of the empty abstraction that nuclear families may turn into, in which every member is diligently performing their role obligations and expectations without being able to find any meaning or satisfaction to it: Helene does not enjoy being a mother; Jesse vainly uses his family as a means of self-assurance and to overcome his past traumas; Jeanne is perpetually frustrated and jealous of Jesse's preference for her younger sister; and Shelley feels smothered by Jesse's oppressive control of her. Shelley will be the one to rebel against the role of submissive daughter into which Jesse tries to force her, and the one to investigate and question Jesse's past and her parents' relationship.

Meanwhile, Jesse becomes obsessed with certain deaths, especially that of one of his mentors, Dr. Perrault. Moreover, Jesse's despise for the body is manifested in the scarce intimate relationships he has with his wife. Helene's and Jesse's attitudes to their bodies reflect Susie Orbach's claim that

[o]ur bodies are made in our culture, in relationships, in fantasy and even in the ambience of the care-giver-infant relationship every bit as our minds are. The body like the mind is pre-wired to be a set of possibilities but these possibilities develop within the relationship and within the culture in a nuanced way as our personalities do... Our bodies are created not simply by their biology, but by the conscious and unconscious ideas we hold about babies' bodies depending on their gender, their class and their ethnicity and by the emotional ambience in which they develop. (qtd. in De Zulueta 274)

This means, Shore and Panksepp explain, that our bodies are psychological as well as physical structures. Our attachment structures (that is, the degree of security we find in others), the losses we have



experienced, the traumas we have been through will determine what we feel ourselves to be (qtd. in De Zulueta 274). In particular, Jesse will find it difficult to combine all these concepts and establish a healthy relationship between his mind and his body, as well as with the people around him.

As the years go by and Helene and Jesse have children, they start to analyze their conflictive relationships with their bodies, as well as their role within the family and the obligations and expectations associated to it. Now, they are parents, so they have fulfilled the main obligation expected in nuclear families: procreation. However, their bonds with their bodies are still deeply troubled, and they try to find a balance with them. In time, both Helene and Jesse consider having extra-marital relationships as a way to solve their mutual lack of satisfaction, which they have never discussed.

Jesse's Self-Created Family System is far from reaching his Desired Family System. He does not have a son, and he is fixated on and anxious about his daughter Shelley's rebellious streak, which is actually a reaction against his oppression. One day, Jesse casually meets Reva, a woman for whom he will feel deeply sexually attracted. His desire for her is described as being "loaded with blood" (*Wonderland* 348), a description which sharply contrasts with Jesse's preference for bloodlessness, and his detachment from the body. Until he meets Reva, Jesse tries to avoid an intimate proximity to bodies with the exception of marital relations and his job as a doctor, and to deny the body's impulses. Meeting Reva seems to promise an upcoming transformation for Jesse, which is not totally fulfilled in the end.

Jesse's image of Reva is associated with airiness, flowers, glow; unlike his image of his wife, which is limited to an objective and aseptic physical description. Reva, then, and not Helene, embodies Jesse's carnal fantasies, opening new possibilities of sexual satisfaction and fulfilment that he had never contemplated before, as well as a new possibility of finding in her the words to express himself. His vision evidences his feelings of superiority toward women: he sees Reva in the colors of a fantasy because he lusts after her; and he perceives Helene more aseptically due to her potential qualities as a mother and wife.

Reva strikes Jesse as the image of wholeness he never had in his adult life. This is represented by her name, which suggests both physicality and thought, idealism and reality (Waller *Dreaming* 148). Her physicality and reality are conveyed by means of the image that Jesse has of her as a sensual woman, and her idealism is seen in her name: “Reva” recalls *reverie*, and “Denk” brings to mind the German verb “denken,” “to think.” “Reva” is not the real name of this character, but one she invents, and this transforms her into an illusion that Jesse pursues for some time and eventually abandons, feeling morally revulsed by the thought of adultery. In Daly’s words, he does not act upon his impulse because for him lust equals evil (61).

When Reva asks Jesse to perform an abortion upon her, Jesse refuses scandalized, and reflects that he only believes in life. Perhaps this originates in Jesse’s enormous will to survive despite the multiple ordeals he has to endure since his biological family was destroyed by his father. Another possible reason is Jesse’s uneasiness upon death and his unrealistic wish to save the whole world, along with his rigid traditional morality.

Jesse eventually considers that he can marry Reva, but that she must have the baby: for him, the abortion is out of the question. He thinks that Reva’s baby can become his. Thus, he cannot transcend his vision of women as objects of his possession, as the bearers of children for him: “She could have his babies,” he reflects (*Wonderland* 373). This proves that he is just substituting Reva for Helene, and suggests that despite the opening of limits that Reva appears to represent at first, Jesse would probably be eventually unable to overcome his reductive and misogynist views of women.

Reva (who apparently has decided to have the baby) accepts Jesse’s proposal of starting a relationship with him. Before meeting her to have sexual intercourse for the first time and thus consummate the adultery, Jesse, honoring his obsession with cleanness, zealously soaps his body. This is mainly caused by his repulsion for the body, but may be also due to his internal revulsion at the thought of committing adultery. Afterward, while he is shaving, Jesse accidentally cuts himself and becomes fascinated by the sight of his own blood. He then purposely cuts his face, his stomach, and his pubic area and watches the blood

streaming “so lightly, experimentally, giddily.” (*Wonderland* 400). As mentioned earlier, blood is unstoppable: its flow is not controlled by the mind. Thus, when Jesse cuts himself instead of having a date with Reva, he might be acknowledging the evidence that blood runs through the veins of his body, while paradoxically, he is also attempting to get rid of it.

Jesse is then, for a short while, liberating himself from his own mania of control: the free flow of blood is the exact opposite to his rigidity, which comes as a momentary satisfaction for him. During this brief moment, Jesse is assuming his own corporeity not as something disgusting, but as natural and acceptable. In a sense, then, cutting his face seems to represent the acceptance of his own identity, and cutting his pubic area stands for the acceptance of his sexual drives. He might be even transcending the limits of sex and gender by contemplating the blood associated with women: for once, he is placing himself in the place of the Other. Another interpretation for the scene is perceiving it as Jesse’s wish to empty himself of blood, that is, a symbol of his continuing rejection of the body drives.

Thus, he substitutes this act in which violence and sex become entangled for the imminent sexual relationship with Reva: this is significant because Jesse tends to associate violence and sex. The conclusion of Jesse’s affair only brings a brief sense of relief, a momentary liberation instead of a permanent one. As Creighton highlights, Oates’s characters who succeed in liberating themselves do so by opening up to their instinctual selves, often through violence or sexual love (*Joyce* 80). The liberation by means of violence or sex is a recurrent Oatesian scene. In the case of Jesse, it is only a momentary liberation; and also perceived in Jules from *them*, or in Elena from *Do with Me What You Will*.<sup>14</sup> Creighton also examines the alternative possibility: she suggests that by accidentally, and then willfully, cutting himself with the razor blade in various body parts including his genitals, Jesse is denying his own sexual drives, first unconsciously and then willingly (*Joyce* 80). At the same time, cutting himself also appears to be a punishment for almost committing adultery, or for having almost fallen to the temptation of lust, which he considers morally repugnant

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<sup>14</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Do With Me*.

as well. Jesse's rejection of adultery may be also caused by his need to keep everything under control. Specifically, adultery would represent for him the moment in which the mind would lose control over his body; while at the same time implying a violation of the control that arbitrates the social order (marriage) and possibly, the moral order.

Therefore, the episode has two main interpretations. The first reading is liberating for Jesse, because he is able to assume his own physicality by listening to his body urges represented by his running blood, which escapes his mental control; and the second one is an oppressive interpretation, in which Jesse is still trying to deny his body processes by getting rid of his blood.

This scene closes the second book of the novel, entitled "The Finite Passing of an Infinite Passion." According to Friedman, the title refers to the infinite passion Jesse suffers, the one that asserts that the self can control reality or go beyond it or that the self is reality; which submits to a finite passing, represented by Jesse's renunciation to have an affair with Reva (*Joyce* 108). In fact, for most of the book, Jesse holds the fantasy that he is able to dominate his surroundings as well as other people. In this second part, he momentarily surrenders this passion in the episode with Reva when he momentarily assumes his corporeity and relishes his iron dominance. In the last part of the novel, Waller remarks, Jesse's failure with Reva still haunts Jesse, now obsessively drawn to his daughter Shelley ("Joyce" 43). Daly also suggests that Jesse's repression with Reva leads him to sexualize his daughter Shelley (61).

Besides, Helene wonders, like her husband, about the role of the body in personal relationships: "What was love: Was it the contact between people? The touching of people? She did not understand. Why this pushing, this falling into an abyss, a sacred abyss?" (*Wonderland* 432). Like Jesse, Helene fails to find any transcendence or deep connection through sexual relationships, because she feels revulsion for sex. She is scared of having intimate moments with her husband, but she "had loved [Jesse] and had opened herself to him, had allowed him to plunge into her, drown into her, reshaping himself inside her. Then he had withdrawn" (*Wonderland* 432). Thus, Helene tries to enjoy sex out of love for Jesse, but she feels him growing indifferent toward her.

This quote also reveals that she senses that Jesse is somehow marking her, which is in fact true: Jesse tries to write his ego and life goals into her, just as the picture from the toilet showed.

Helene feels that Jesse had loved her more when she was pregnant, but she has never wanted to become a mother: she becomes one because she interprets it as an unavoidable female destiny. Helene fulfills this role believing that

marriage would be the beginning of her life; she had had a long life as a daughter, a famous man's daughter, and she had been eager to begin her real life. She would be a woman, womanly and fulfilled. A wife. But this had not come about... And then, puzzled, she had believed that the birth of her first child would fulfill her. [...] But the birth had left her exhausted and at a distance from herself, from her body. Her baby had overwhelmed her. She was ashamed of herself and it occurred to her that she must have another baby, another baby to make her normal, a real woman. But after the second baby nothing was different. She felt a final, terrible certainty about her strangeness: she would never become a real woman. (*Wonderland* 436)

First, it is interesting to notice how Helene does not mention being her mother's daughter, only her father's; which fits the pattern of female characters from the novel insisting on being born of men, along with Shelley and Hilda. This is the result of a misogynistic society denying the mother's voice and agency, as we shall explain in the next chapter, "Mothers." Second, having always lived subordinated to a man, when Helene tries to find her own identity and her own goals, she can only resort to what she has been encouraged to do: being a mother and a wife. However, to her shame, this does not satisfy her, and so she is convinced that she cannot be a real woman if she does not conform to the patriarchal expectations for a woman. She becomes a gentle and caring mother, but never shows too much enthusiasm about her condition.

Helene is particularly distressed when she finds out that she cannot have more children: "She had wept. She had become hysterical, hating herself, accusing herself: *A failure as a woman...*" (*Wonderland* 371, emphasis in the original). Helene had decided that she would submit to

the idea that a woman's fulfilment is achieved by having children, and when she cannot have any more of them, she feels that she has not fulfilled herself, she has not even fulfilled this goal she never really wanted.

In other words, Helene has reduced her whole complex identity to the functions of motherhood, and now that she cannot have children, she feels that she has lost her source of identity, and this becomes problematic, especially when her daughters grow and become adolescents who do not need her as they did when they were little.

At this point, Helene reflects on her present condition and all she can hear is society telling her that she has become too old, which she interprets as being no longer useful for society since she has lost her reproductive capacity and her function as a mother is not so prominent now. Helene has lost the only identity she had and as a consequence, she feels a void. Thus, when a man called Mannie Breck asks her for a date, she accepts out of curiosity to see what happens between them, and due to a certain erotic pull she feels within herself, despite not having much interest in him as a person.

Helene meets Mannie in the shopping mall "Wonderland East." As Grant has argued, in Oates's short fiction, the shopping mall is a metaphor of the impermanence of human relations and the vacuity of lives, as seen in "Years of Wonder" and "Stalking" from *Marriages and Infidelities*; and "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"<sup>15</sup> from *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*<sup>16</sup> (21). This metaphor is also seen in the case of "Wonderland East" from *Wonderland*, which is not only an echo of the novel's title, but constitutes a rampant irony: while "Wonderland" evokes the image of a land of dreaming, fantasy and possibility (which reminds of the name of this last part of the book, "Dreaming America," a title that appears to promise some hope for Jesse's search of identity too), the addition of the biblical resonances in "East" negates the access to such land. In the book of the Genesis, God casts a curse upon Cain when he learns that he has killed his brother Abel, and orders him to live in "the land of Nod, on the east of Eden" (Gen 4, 16). Thus, the artificial temple of consumption that the mall is

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<sup>15</sup> Hereafter cited in text as "Where."

<sup>16</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Wheel*.

offers, and then denies, the possibility of transcendence. The neighborhoods from *Expensive* are also metaphors of fake paradises. Helene and Mannie's failed affair presents a similar pattern of the emergence of a possibility of fulfilment or pleasure and its subsequent frustration.

Interestingly, Helene and Mannie casually run into one demonstration against the Vietnam War (1955-1975). As it usually occurs in Oates, the history of the United States reflects the characters' conflicts. In this case, the youth protests against Vietnam coincided with the students' revolts of the 1960s, which demanded immediate changes. The counterculture that developed from this discontent showed its disgust against many of their parents more moderated views (which contrasted with their demand for radical changes), as well as the social conditions of the time, including racism and poverty. Radical students expressed themselves in public protests. The first great student outburst took place at the University of California at Berkeley in the Fall of 1964. There were revolts in most of the campuses in the late 1960s. While their parents confronted the social problems of their time with moderation, these youths tended to be intransigent. Along with this, the raise of the second wave of feminism and the sexual revolution opened new possibilities for women and the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community, whereas the civil rights Movement fought to eradicate racial inequalities and injustice (Garraty 867-868, 870).

Helene contemplates the demonstration, which represents the youth's rebellion against the generation she belongs to, with awe and shock. She has mostly lived by the rules of her parents and cannot comprehend such insubordination. She feels personally threatened by the crowd: "*Hate. We hate you [j] It is over for you, they all seemed to be saying*" (*Wonderland* 447, emphasis in the original). As Bender explains, Helene's frustrated sexual longings seem mocked by the demonstrators (61). Apart from that, Helene may feel personally challenged by these youths rebelling against traditional modes of living, herself being a woman who has complied with women's traditional destiny of marrying and having children, against her will, only to feel that she has not totally fulfilled her "duty," or perhaps that she cannot

fulfill it any longer; and that now it is too late to do it, or either too late to live an alternative life free of those responsibilities.

Helene notices a particular girl smoking, and they stare at each other with hatred, utterly unable of understanding the other's perspective: each one of them is focusing exclusively on her individual position and identifying the other as the enemy. In Johnson's opinion, this is one of the scenes of the novel in which characters locate evil on the "Other," demonstrating thus their fear of communality and representing once more the tragedy of the self-centered ego (*Understanding* 138). Indeed, in her resentment, Helene only considers her own frustrated status, and not the crowds vindications; so, enraged, she knocks a cigarette out of the girl's mouth and walks away, feeling liberated (at least momentarily) from the constrains of the flesh and her family, as well of the possibility of an affair with Mannie which she now disregards:

She had finished everything for herself [j] The erotic glow in her loins [j] had spread lightly through her body now, [j] harmless. She was fulfilled. She was free of [Mannie], who could not love her now, and she was free of her husband, her daughters, the people in the park, her own youth. It was over: the tyranny of her body, the yearning for other bodies, for talking and touching and dreaming and loving. (*Wonderland* 448)

In Bender's words, Helene is declaring here her divorce from society and the self by asserting that it is all over, including the tyranny of her body; but this is just a sterile escape, the freedom of a catatonic (61). Bender makes here a valid argument: Helene's frustration seems too deep and long-termed to be solved by such a fleeting act of liberation, just as in the case of Jesse's cutting himself with a blade; but in any case, it comes as a welcomed relief. Therefore, Helene renounces to try to find any erotic connection with a man: she knows that Mannie was horrified by her confrontation with the girl, and would not want to see her again, but does not care. Most crucially, she now favors the apparent peace of mind of not having to comply anymore with her female destiny as a mother.



### 2.3 PARENTING STYLES

Parenting styles have an undeniable effect over the children's development, since, according to Hutter, the family "transmits the traditional ways of a culture to each new generation" ("Multicultural" 5). This section analyzes this impact within the framework of developmental psychology, through the works of experts such as David White and Anne Woollett, among others.

Parenting styles reflect the parents' wish for their children to develop their capacities to the maximum, not only the physical capacities, but also the mental ones:

En realidad, la educación, la cultura, el cultivo del arte, la ciencia o el pensamiento, no son sino herramientas para esa mejora intelectual que contribuye a un fin no sólo personal sino colectivo, produciendo nuevos desarrollos que mejorarán la vida de las personas [...] las modificaciones que vamos introduciendo tienen una dimensión prospectiva y lanzada hacia el futuro: queremos que nuestros hijos, que la sociedad futura, sean "mejores" y tengan más capacidades y posibilidades de las que tuvimos nosotros. (Feito Grande 215)

This is attained, in part, through the kind of education offered by parents. Mothers and fathers have different approaches to this educative function, and while some appear to overlook it, others take it to extreme lengths. For instance, Nada from *Expensive* generally aims for a life of independence from her parental functions as an educator. On the contrary, Dr. Pedersen in *Wonderland* is perhaps the most extreme example of a conscious attempt to shape a child: after he adopts Jesse, he proclaims his hopes that the boy will follow his steps and become a doctor:

I have been planning, imagining how you will grow up into my place, into my very being. It is a challenge to me, this shaping of you, Jesse, because you do not have my genes, my flesh has not contributed to your flesh. And yet I believe I will succeed with you... Correcting defects of

nature [j] has always been my specialty. (*Wonderland* 106)

The doctor wants Jesse to grow up as his living image, his cloned heir. He even explicitly uses the word “shaping,” and seems to be speaking of a project instead of his son: in fact, he asserts that he has adopted Jesse because his other children have failed to satisfy him in this sense.

Parenting is supposed to entail authority, but also warmth. Authority then is a crucial component of children’s growth, but it needs to be understood in its correct sense:

La autoridad hay que entenderla no como limitación, no como restricción de posibilidades, no como rigidez o como intransigencia, sino como “auctoritas”, “augere”, “crecimiento”, ayudar al sujeto a que crezca, a que aumente. Soy autoritario en la medida que ayudo al otro a ser más “sí mismo”, a potenciar sus capacidades, a reforzar su ser, a ayudarlo a ser lo que debe ser y no como limitación de lo que debe ser. (Ríos González 30)

When authority is correctly understood and exerted, the children mature more and better. According to Ríos González, there is no personality maturation if there is not a hierarchy inside the family system. Similarly, there is no personality maturation in the children if they do not accept this hierarchy (29). Rof Carballo (qtd. in Ríos González 29) asserts that many young people get free from their parents and end up in the hands of a tyrant figure to which they immaturely submit. This figure might be a person or an inanimate element or activity like drugs. Shelley, in *Wonderland*, refuses to submit to her father’s excessive control and flees from it only to eventually submit to his boyfriend’s will and to drugs; and in *them*, a teenage Loretta runs away from violence in her Family System of Origin and submits to a hasty and abusive marriage.

Parenting styles have a definite impact on the children’s lives, but they are not the only factor affecting children’s personality or behavior. As White and Woollett warn, parents’ behavior is associated with children’s social and intellectual competence, but we need to be

cautious about the specific effects caused by the parents' attitudes: that is, we need to consider carefully what traits might be part of the vertical identity, and which ones may have an alternative origin. Parents' attitudes are often conditioned by their children's behavior, too (49). As a study by R. R. Sears, E. E. Maccoby and H. Lenin found out, punitive parents tend to have children who are more aggressive, maybe because the children learn that aggression is acceptable. But it may also be that when faced with very aggressive children, parents tend to be more punitive. In such cases, to discern the actual origin of the situation, it should be necessary to see how parents behave to other children of the family, or which occurs first: the children's aggressiveness or the parents' punitiveness (qtd. in White and Woollett 49).

Thus, we might conclude that there are uncountable variables in parents-children relationships. In the present section, we propose a series of parenting styles with a set of considerably uniform characteristics with the purpose of introducing and organizing our analysis of the corpus by identifying a series of tendencies; but there are numerous situations that interfere in the result of these relationships, as we shall see.

Moreover, children often learn things outside their families that are different from those learned at home: that is, they have their own horizontal identities, apart from the vertical ones. The experiences with teachers and peers are not just simply added but might also transform the child. The personal and social characteristics of both children and adults are the result of the integration of their past and present experiences. When children are little, family experiences are extremely relevant. As they grow up, they are still important (due to the psychological imprint they left and its immediate effects) but they are also interwoven with extrafamilial experiences, especially those involving peers (Palacios González 59).

There are several categories into which parenting styles might be classified. In order to examine them, we shall apply the compatible parameters of Maccoby and Martin (qtd. in Ladd 8; and White and Woollett 48-49), Baumrind (qtd. in White and Woollett 45-46, 48-49) and Palacios González (56-58).

Parenting styles may be classified along four main parameters. The first one, warmth, refers to their being either responsive or unresponsive, that is, more or less receptive. Warmth manifests itself when parents are more willing or able to show affection to their children, praise them or accept their dependency need. Second, control and discipline refer to their being demanding or undemanding, that is, restrictive or permissive. It depends on the autonomy the child is allowed to have. Third, the clarity of parent-child communication covers the openness of their communication, the involvement of children in decision making and the parents' willingness to give reasons for their disciplinary actions. Fourth, the maturity demands are the parental pressure to perform well.

From these dimensions, four typologies emerge, which have been labelled according to the classification of Palacios González: authoritarian, democratic, permissive or indulgent, and indifferent or uninvolved. Not every parent exhibits each single characteristic of a certain style, or even adheres coherently to a single style. As a result, a fifth group is created: the mixed category, which combines traits from several of the main four typologies. These types of parents shall be analyzed in the light of four novels from the corpus: *Wonderland*, *Mulvaney's*, *them* and *Carthage*, respectively; while *Garden* and *Expensive* are analyzed to illustrate the fifth mixed type.

The subsystem mother-father does not necessarily adhere homogeneously to the same style. In fact, this is rarely the case. The theory that we present is a frame of reference for illustrating the different types of parenting styles, and the general impact, or lack of thereof, that every particular style has for the children. But there is an enormous set of variables at work in the parent-child relationship, and we shall try to take them into account in our analysis, too.

### **2.3.1 Authoritarian Parents**

Authoritarian parents show more discipline than warmth, that is, they are more demanding than responsive: they are strict and controlling of the children's behavior, therefore discipline achieves very high levels. These parents demand good performance from their children, so they are high in maturity demands. The parents do not

discuss their demands and restrictions with their children, and only give few explanations to them, which means that their clarity of communication is low. If children deviate from their rules, they are punished with little affection, so warmth levels are low too.

Authoritarian parents tend to have children who are withdrawn, less spontaneous, unmotivated and insecure. They sense that they have little ability to control their environment, and so they develop few strategies for doing so. Authoritarian parents shield their children from stress by restricting their activities and thus preventing them from encountering stressful events often. As children live in an environment that promotes dependency, they obviously grow to be more dependent, and do not often take the initiative in social interactions. They are less cheerful and less spontaneous, and since they receive few tokens of love, they provide few tokens of affection to their peers. Research on parenting styles shows that authoritarian parenting may result in children who are more aggressive, withdrawn or dominated by peers (Maccoby and Martin qtd. in Ladd 8, Baumrind qtd. in White and Woollett 46, and 48 Palacios González 56-58).

Dr. Pedersen from *Wonderland* is the perfect incarnation of an authoritarian father: he completely dominates not only his children, but also his wife. Undoubtedly, he is the most controlling parent from the corpus. He forces his relatives to follow the vital path that he has designed for them: he wants Hilda to be a brilliant mathematician; Frederich to excel as a music composer; Jesse to become a doctor like him (to the extent that he wishes to completely model him by forcing him to accept his vertical identity as practically his only one); and Mrs. Pedersen to be a flawless mother and wife. As he tells Hilda: "Perfection is difficult [...], but ultimately it is not as difficult as imperfection. The demands we make upon ourselves constitute our salvation. It is necessary to be perfect" (*Wonderland* 153).

In order to impose his requirements, he mainly resorts to infusing fear, which is a typical trait of psychological violence. All the members of the family are afraid of provoking the father's reproach or wrath. The person who suffers this violence more acutely is Mrs. Pedersen, who is subdued to her husband to the extent that she feels that she has lost part of her identity. He compels her to be a flawless wife and mother totally

relegated to the private sphere: he expects her to take care of the house and the garden, prepare meals, supervise the domestic employees, attend the children's necessities, etc. Dr. Pedersen reprimands his wife when she fails to meet his instructions, complaining about being forced to attend to domestic matters himself. Dr. Pedersen has total control over Mrs. Pedersen's decisions, and prevents her from exerting her own will. This is part of the psychological violence he inflicts upon her.

Moreover, there is a certain role confusion in their wife-husband subsystem because Dr. Pedersen often appears to perceive Mrs. Pedersen as a young, incompetent child, and he treats her condescendingly and authoritatively, as he does with his other children. They thus behave, simultaneously, as wife-husband and father-daughter. As a result, Mrs. Pedersen shows common symptoms of children of authoritarian parents: she has a low self-esteem, is extremely dependent and has a decreased ability to control her environment due to the confinement to which she is subjected. Besides, she lacks motivation because she is deeply unsatisfied with her role as a mother of children who do not pay attention to her or return her love. Her anguish makes her turn to food and alcohol consumption as coping strategies.

Mrs. Pedersen's fluctuation of roles between wife and daughter is marked by the fact that she calls her husband "papa." As a result of this role transformation, Mrs. Pedersen barely holds any authority over her children. When she does act like a parental figure, she shows symptoms of being a rather permissive parent, since she treats children warmly and spoils them, mainly with food, a central question in the novel. This capacity of simultaneously assuming two differentiated roles is significant, since it proves that roles inside a family are rather flexible in Oates. This could at first seem a positive trait because it could imply flexibility to adapt to different situations; but as we shall repeatedly see, it usually provokes a mixture of confusion, undefinition and distortion that has negative consequences for the characters.

Besides, Dr. Pedersen's warmth is rather low, and it needs to be merited according to his demands: affection is conditioned to the children's absolute compliance to his rules; that is, he only seems able to love them (or, more precisely, to manifest this love) if they

unquestionably submit to him. At times, Dr. Pedersen is willing to give explanations for his demands, but he does it in an infantilizing manner that nonetheless admits no disagreeing. In general, Dr. Pedersen treats his children more as employees who need to demonstrate their productivity rather than as his own kin. Dr. Pedersen's maturity demands are ambiguous: in general, they are extremely high since he forces the children to excel in their respective fields of study; but at the same time, he addresses them as if they were very young children unable to achieve anything without his guidance. Jesse is the only child who is treated in a more mature manner, and provided with more explanations.

The reaction of the children to this authorial parenting differs in the case of the biological children and Jesse. The Pedersens' biological children, Hilda and Frederich, find difficulties in providing tokens of affection. They do not appear to have many friends, or any friends at all; and their relationship with their parents is rather strained: Hilda both fears and hates Dr. Pedersen; while Frederich, in Jesse's estimation, finds it "difficult to hide his contempt" for his father (*Wonderland* 108), but still dares not disobey him.

Hilda's and Frederich's relation to their mother is rather distant and disinterested. They tend to be cold, scornful and despising toward her, and they repeatedly reject her tokens of love, possibly because Mrs. Pedersen's confidence and personality are almost destroyed by the authority of her husband, who reduces her to both a submissive mother and a kind of daughter. Her authority over the children is thus totally undermined: they despise her. This behavior seems to follow Richard Everett's assertion, in *Expensive*, that mothers who cringe and beg for love get nothing. At times, though, Hilda looks for protection from Mrs. Pedersen. This complex bond is examined in the chapter "Mothers." Besides, Mrs. Pedersen is frequently worried and remorseful about disturbing her prodigious children, who develop such an important work, with domestic matters. This demonstrates in what little regard domestic work is held in contrast with intellectual work, which is much more appreciated.

Both Hilda and Frederich do not seem to have many social skills. This may be caused by three main reasons. First, they are treated in a

strict manner and do not receive much love from their father, and at the same time they plainly reject the love they receive from their mother. Second, they are educated at home, where they develop their extraordinary aptitudes for mathematics and music, but not their social skills. Neither of them attends college despite their capacities: Frederich refuses to do so and Hilda is prevented from doing so due to unnamed health problems. As they rarely leave the house, they are not usually in company of their peers. Their mother notices the roots of this problem, which takes the form of a loop: “[Hilda is] always teasing me [...] That’s because she spends too much time alone... she should get outside with other girls...she’s always teasing me because we’re alone here together all day long, every day...” (*Wonderland* 155). Third, their personal disposition is shy and fierce, and so they are thus rather awkward in their social interactions, and little inclined to leave the house at all.

Hilda likes Jesse (it is unclear if her feelings are fraternal or romantic) and wants him to be proud of her, but she is not able to develop a friendly relationship with him. She just merely watches him from a distance, possibly due to her shyness and low self-esteem, which is aggravated by her shame about her obese body, to the extent that she “never went out by herself, never. [...] how terrible it must be for ordinary people to see [her and her father]” (*Wonderland* 140). And so, Hilda keeps her distance from Jesse to the extent that, although he holds warm brotherly feelings for her and instinctively realizes that “her brittle mockery [...] had been a kind of camaraderie” (*Wonderland* 171), he eventually feels unease with her and the distance between them grows irreparably.

Consequently, Dr. Pedersen’s biological children are withdrawn and lack spontaneity. They channel the stress caused by the excessive domination of their father through their compulsive eating habits. They are excessively dependent on their closed surroundings and despite having enormous talents, their gifts have become a burden to them; that is, they are made slaves to their talent, and this reduces their degree of motivation. As Jesse perceives, Hilda “always [had] the correct answers. She was never wrong. But it gave her no joy [j] She was like an instrument to provide answers to questions” (*Wonderland* 154). This is mainly caused by their father’s high demands on them and by the fact



that they are not allowed to have hobbies. This restriction of new activities could have shielded the Pedersen children from stress, but in fact in the novel it contributes to keeping them entrapped and makes them less resourceful.

In contrast, Jesse does not seem to have so many difficulties when expressing his feelings of affection, neither does he appear to be as withdrawn, insecure or anxious as his siblings. This may be due to his personality and to the fact that he has lived less time within this strict environment; or perhaps because he is treated more warmly than his siblings: he appears to be Dr. Pedersen's favorite child, possibly because he hopes that Jesse will fulfil the expectations that his biological children have not satisfied according to his standards. Jesse has less dependency on the household than his siblings. In fact, he is given a car by their father, which grants him more freedom. Besides, his father's plans for him include moving away from their Lockport (New York) home in order to study at the University of Michigan. Consequently, Jesse's wider range of movement grants him a higher degree of ability to control his environment than that of Hilda and Frederick. Jesse's motivation is not as ambiguous as his siblings': he is determined to become a doctor like his stepfather, and he eventually does. However, like his stepsiblings, Jesse is not completely protected from anxiety despite being allowed more freedom: on the contrary, his father always puts pressure on him to achieve the goals he expects from him.

The structure of the Pedersen family is reflected in the family's meal arrangements. In fact, food plays a predominant role in Oates's fiction, where it is a recurrent trope: her descriptions of meals are not only among her most vivid passages, but also among her most metaphorical. As she has expressed in the article "'Food' as Poetry," food "seems scarcely to exist in itself but rather as an expression of metaphor. [...] No one eats merely to—eat" (*Woman* 310). Oates also considers that, in affluent societies,

thinking about food in abstract and codified terms can come virtually to replace eating itself as a symbolic activity. Not *what* one eats but *how* it is prepared; not what food *is* but what it *means*; *who* has prepared it for you, or

for *whom* you have prepared it. (*Woman* 311, emphasis in the original)

Oatesian characters, then, are rarely indifferent to food. Commonly, their relation to food adopts two main radical and unhealthy forms: one of extreme addiction and another one of obsessive rejection. Both are equally compulsive behaviors, as the writer says: “one can become as addicted to the systematic denial of food as to its more celebratory consumption” (Oates *Woman* 311). These obsessive behaviors hide the subtleties and complexities of the personalities of the characters who display them, which will be examined in their corresponding sections. Broadly speaking, overeating in Oates is a symptom of lack of control which usually hides either a need to be emotionally fulfilled or a wish to possess others; while fasting may be caused by a wish to exert control over one’s life or to punish oneself, a rejection of sex due to trauma, or an appeal toward death.

Thus, on the one hand, Richard Everett from *Expensive*, the Pedersen family including Jesse while living with them and Trick Monk in *Wonderland*, as well as Connie from the short story “Faithless” from the collection *Faithless. Tales of Transgression* (2001) (who becomes famished for years after her mother’s sudden disappearance), indulge in overeating. On the other hand, Faye and Nadine Green from *them*, Shelley Vogel from *Wonderland*, Marianne Mulvaney from *Mulvaney’s*, and Cressida Mayfield from *Carthage*, as well as Elena Howe from *Do With Me*, Karen Herz from *With Shuddering Fall*,<sup>17</sup> Marya Knauer from *Marya*, Ingrid Boone from *Man Crazy*,<sup>18</sup> Anelia from *I’ll Take You There* (2002) and the female protagonist from the segment “The Orange” in the theater play *I Stand Before You Naked. A Collage Play* (1991) tend to reject eating. Maureen Wendall experiences both states in *them*: first obesity and later on a sort of anorexia. The fact that most of these characters are female is not a coincidence: it accounts for the troubled bond that many women have with their bodies, which they do not find apt to fit social conventions or their own ideals.

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<sup>17</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Shuddering*.

<sup>18</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Crazy*.

In the case of the Pedersens, the father is the absolute king of the household, and this is represented by the eating scenes in the novel and even the dining room furniture arrangements: “[t]he five chairs around the table were cushioned in deep red velvet, four of them without arms and the fifth, at the head of the table, Dr. Pedersen’s chair, with elegant curved arms that were also cushioned” (*Wonderland* 99). His chair is reminiscent of a throne from which he governs his family.

As Oates has noticed, when analyzing the question of meals, it is important to notice who prepares the food and for whom (*Woman* 311). In this case, meals are meticulously prepared for the whole family by Mrs. Pedersen and Dora, a domestic employee. In the rigid gender division of tasks in the family, preparing meals is one of Mrs. Pedersen’s obligations within the private sphere, into which she puts a great effort: the Pedersens’ mealtimes are composed by a great number of delicate and elaborated dishes that are eaten ravenously. They also reflect the household’s prevalent sexism: men, even adolescents like Jesse and Frederick, are always served first.

Dr. Pedersen uses mealtimes to check the advances of his family during that particular day. At breakfast, the so-called “Map of the Day” is established, that is, the general structure of the day for each of them. At luncheon and dinner, the Map is measured against their actual achievements. Therefore, at the table, the conversation is basically a questioning by Dr. Pedersen that resembles a trial, making the family’s communication spontaneous, stilted and artificial:

The meal was like a race—everyone ate fast, skillfully, as if there might not be enough food—but it was also like a race because they were being questioned closely, eyed closely, by Dr. Pedersen. He would begin casually with his wife. *What did you accomplish today, dear?* And Mrs. Pedersen will haltingly list the things she had done around the house [...] And then Hilda was examined briefly. [...] When Frederick was questioned he replied at once [...] And then it was Jesse’s turn. (*Wonderland* 158-159, emphasis in the original)

The family's excessive food intake is thus associated to the anxiety caused by the rigid family structure and the father's authoritarian and controlling attitude: it is a kind of outlet for the stress generated by the situation and by the constraining atmosphere that they should always endure. At the same time, for Dr. Pedersen, eating works as a metaphor of his devouring ego which exerts a ruthless and unbound power over the family; that is, Dr. Pedersen's voracity is an adequate reflection of his dominating nature.

The excess of eating also represents an excess of ego in Hilda and Frederich, who are children prodigies, and, despite having insecurities, are convinced of their superiority in the realms of mathematics and music. This sensation is reinforced by the isolation in which they live, which prevents them from developing peer bonds that could potentially infuse into them a more balance self-esteem derived from possible democratizing common activities. The case of Mrs. Pedersen is slightly different, as seen in the next chapter. The obesity of the Pedersens is caused by the enormous quantity of food that she prepares for them, which is a reflection of her total dedication to her family. That is, she compensates her lack of self-esteem with her exclusive commitment to her role of mother/wife. Thus, this excess of food represents her "excessive" exertion of her motherly love.

Jesse's biological father Willard had also eaten in a vigorously aggressive manner, metaphorically reflecting the threat that he represented for others. As Friedman adds, Dr. Pedersen is a grotesque embodiment of Nietzsche's Superman, an overreacher like the gluttonous Max from *Shuddering*, the outrageously wealthy Marvin Howe from *Do with Me*, and the power-mad Andrew Petrie in *The Assassins. A Book of Hours*. Their obesity, wealth and spiritual deformity imply their extreme individualism. Dr. Pedersen is the one character who best exemplifies this by asserting that he corrects the defects of nature and that his fate is to displace God (Friedman *Joyce* 101). Moreover, the fact that the meal at the Pedersens is described as a "race" reflects not only the voracious nature of Dr. Pedersen, but also his capitalist competitive tendencies: he strives to be the best in his field and expects his family to do the same. This is the reason why he questions them about their daily accomplishments.

Jesse adopts the Pedersens' compulsion for eating and abandons it after being expelled from the family. Friedman summarizes these different phases by establishing a fitting comparison between Jesse's changes in size and those of Lewis Carroll's character Alice, protagonist of the novels *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. According to Friedman, Oates's *Wonderland* is a novel about proportions, like Carroll's *Alice* books. Jesse's changes in size are reflected into the episodic structure of *Wonderland* (another notorious trait from Carroll's *Alice* books). In Jesse's case, the alterations are both physical and psychical: Jesse is physically enlarged when he becomes an obese adolescent and then gets slim after being expelled from the Pedersen family. This corresponds to his acquisition of the family's ego and the subsequent (and momentary) loss of his confidence after he is abandoned by Dr. Pedersen. Jesse stops overeating after he is expelled from the family, but he starts to fortify his ego in other ways: by becoming mentally enlarged as a neurosurgeon; then psychically enlarged again as a vampiric father and husband. At the end, Jesse shrinks from *Übermensch*<sup>19</sup> into an ordinary, self-questioning man. On the other hand, Shelley, in order to escape from her father, tries to grow smaller and smaller (Friedman *Joyce* 95-96, 106). It would seem that her father's enormous ego does not let her room to expand her own consciousness and sense of worth. At the same time, Jesse's physical form is altered as he meets a series of characters who represent specific aspects of American culture who pose diverse philosophical solutions to the problems of existence, as seen in the chapter "Children."

The references to devouring inevitably bring to mind psychoanalytic theories which have also been applied to Carroll's *Alice* novels. As Creighton notices, oral incorporation is a vehicle for identity in both Carroll's and Oates's novels, just like an infant in the oral phase

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<sup>19</sup> The German word *Übermensch* ("Superman") refers to the superior man who justifies the existence of the human race. The term was significantly used by Friedrich Nietzsche, especially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885). This superior man would emerge when any man with superior potential totally masters himself and strikes off conventional Christian morality in order to create his own values, which would be completely based on life on this earth ("*Übermensch*" n. p.). Jesse certainly feels this pull to develop his full potential and to master himself.

of libidinal development cannot perfectly distinguish between itself and the world and attempts to take in the whole world through his mouth. The changes of size of Alice and Jesse represent changes of self and shatter any sense of permanent identity. Many psychologists have noted the recurrence of oral trauma or sadistic trends of a cannibalistic nature in Carroll's work. In both *Alice's* two novels and *Wonderland*, fantastic rituals of eating are given prominent focus (the Mad Hatter's tea party and the Pedersen's meals). Besides, cannibalization is a literal and figurative possibility in both works. In the later oral phase, the child is afraid of mouths, and in Alice we find multiple creatures being eaten or eating, as well as in Oates's *Wonderland* there are recurrent images of mouths and related symbols such as wombs, sacs, boxes, shells and cells. Besides, Hilda claims that her father wants to eat her; Dr. Pedersen plots to appropriate and symbolically devour Jesse's selfhood; Monk eats a human womb; Perrault dreams of transplanting brains; and Jesse metaphorically assimilates bits of his fathers, daughter, patients and medical knowledge to prevent people from going away from him. Both Alice and Jesse are successful (Alice wins the chess game, and Jesse becomes a neurosurgeon); but ironically, they bring chaos rather than order to their worlds: Alice floods Wonderland with her tears, prompts a pack of cards to revolt against her and destroys the looking-glass; while Jesse increases his wife's disconnection by withdrawing from her and drives Shelley into a flight for sanity. At the end, Alice flees from that world under the ground of consciousness and wakes up; and Jesse rejects the alternate dream-vision that Reva represents (Creighton Joyce 83, 85).

In conclusion, in the case of the Pedersen family, eating and overeating are partly a manifestation of the authoritarian attitude of the father: his obsession to keep his family under his control and his orders transforms him into a devouring ego that eventually disturbs the identities of the rest of his family, particularly his wife, whom he submits to psychological violence.

### **2.3.2 Democratic Parents**

Democratic parents show high degrees of discipline, but also of warmth: they are demanding, but also responsive and nurturing toward

their children. They tend not to be intrusive but are ready to impose restrictions if necessary, and therefore they have a high degree of control. These parents assume that they have enough skill and knowledge to control their children, and that the children are mature and competent, and should accept responsibility for their actions, so these parents make high maturity demands. They give reasons for what they expect of them: they are high in clarity of communication. This is why their children have more advanced moral concepts, because they have received explanations about the norms they had to follow. Children with democratic parents are exposed to stressful events of their own making and are expected to cope with the consequences of their actions. Democratic parents have children who do better in social, emotional and cognitive measures, apart from showing more self-confidence. Besides, democratic parenting is linked to higher levels of social responsibility and independence both in boys and girls. Children do not tend to be involved in violent behavior (Maccoby and Martin qtd. in Ladd 8; Baumrind qtd. in White and Woollett 46, 48-49; and Palacios González 56-58).

The best example of democratic parents are Corinne and Michael Mulvaney from *Mulvaney's*. However, their democratic parenting style is transformed into authoritarian after the family tragedy, that is, after Marianne's rape. The rape is the turning point that divides the novel into two phases. We shall initially concentrate on the first part, when Corinne and Michael can be classified as democratic parents, and subsequently examine their implementation of authoritarian parenting. As we shall explain, the democratic style was part of the illusion of perfection that the family used to believe in.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, the youngest child Judd, presents how ideal and flawless his family used to be, repeatedly describing the close and loving relationships that the family members displayed. The characters are themselves deluded about their perfection, and so is the reader. As Judd recalls, “[e]verything in those days was stark and intense and almost hurtful—I mean, it had the power to make me so *happy*, so *excited*” (*Mulvaney's* 16, emphasis in the original). However, this situation of family bliss is revealed as illusory and self-deceptive when they are unable to deal with the daughter's

rape. They used to be a “perfect” patriarchal family in which each member had her/his perfect (and illusory) role from which there was no escape: these roles are so inflexible that thwart any attempt at transformation or adaptation. Particularly, as explained in the chapter “Fathers,” Marianne is never forgiven by her father for, in his view, ceasing to be an obedient and good daughter, as well as a virgin, even if her initiation into sex occurred against her will.

Thus, in the first part of the book, the parents exhibit characteristics of the democratic style, making their nurturance toward their children explicit by treating them with respect and affection, and apparently valuing their individuality, but under the condition that they submit to the stiff nuclear family structure under the authority of the father. The dominance of the father is not so explicit as in the case of Dr. Pedersen, so that for the first part of the book, the characters are deluded about the democratic structure of the family, which shows its real nature after the rape.

This delusion is manifested through the multiple affectionate nicknames that each family member has: Michael is nicknamed *Curly*, *Captain*, *Grouchy* and *Groucho* by the whole family, and *Big Bear*, *Chickie* and *Sugarcake* by Corinne; Mike is *Mike Jr.*, *Mikey-Junior*, *Big Guy*, *Mule* and *Number Four*; Patrick is *P.J.* and *Pinch*; Marianne is *Button* and *Chickadee*; and Judd is *Babe*, *Dimple* and *Ranger*. Corinne is only nicknamed by her husband, who calls her *Darling*, *Honeylove*, *Sweetheart*, *Sugarcake*, or *Whistle*. The narrator presents this extensive list of nicknames as a proof of affection between the characters. Nevertheless, since nicknames are also a way of controlling and modelling others, we might interpret it as an attitude of ignorance or blindness toward the characters’ real identities; and, in this case, toward the rigidity that the family structure hides behind the courteous mask it displays on peaceful times. For instance, Marianne’s being called *Button* and *Chickadee* imposes infantilized, “charming” and submissive traits upon her; whereas Judd is presented as a young and inexperienced member of the family by being referred to as *Babe*. Corinne’s nicknames, like Marianne’s, also suggest docility, infantilization and submission; whereas Michael’s nicknames, *Captain* and *Grouchy*, point out to his position of authority. The characters are trapped in these



conceptions, and will find it almost impossible to flee from them: only the destruction of the “bliss” of the perfect traditional nuclear family will grant them this freedom.

In this family, as it occurs with democratic parents, discipline is always maintained. Corinne and Michael consider that their children are mature enough to assume responsibilities, and so they assign them chores around the farm which include taking care of animals and tending to the orchard. At this stage, discipline is exerted in a gentle manner because the children are obedient: it is when they start to disagree or contradict their parents that discipline takes a domineering and forceful appearance.

At the beginning of the novel, both parents resort to an open and honest communication. Unlike at the Pedersens’ household, the Mulvaney’s meals are infused with spontaneous and lively conversation, sometimes centered around educational programs they watch on television: “we’d discuss them during, and afterward—we Mulvaney’s were a family who *talked*” (*Mulvaney’s* 16, emphasis in the original). The quotation makes an interesting distinction by using the past tense, indicating that the communication was only apparently open in the past; that is, during relaxed and unproblematic times: when tough times arrive, the communication is proved as highly defective.

Both the Pedersens and the Mulvaney’s grant a high value to education, but their techniques are opposed: in the Pedersen family, it is infused through a rigid code that admits no spontaneity; while the members of the Mulvaney family animatedly share knowledge. As a result, the children communicate with their parents on their own will, informing them about daily occurrences without their parents’ prompt or imposition to do so. Corinne, for example, has “always been proud she wasn’t the kind of mother to ‘investigate’—on principle. *I want my children to trust me. To think of me as an equal*” (*Mulvaney’s* 115, emphasis in the original). This proves, too, the parents’ non-intrusive nature.

All these traits are condensed in a significant conversation among Michael, Mike and Patrick that Judd overhears when he is a small child. He is not included in it due to the contents of the conversation: the father is discussing with his older sons a sexual assault that has taken place in

the community. He harshly tells them that they must respect women, but despite his severity, he finishes the conversation by stating that he loves them:

No sons of mine are going to be involved in behavior like that. If anybody's treating a girl or a woman rudely in your presence—you protect her. If it means going against your friends, the hell with your "friends"—got it? [...] if I ever learn you [Mike] were involved, even just that you *knew*, at the time, I'll break your ass. Got it? [...] O.K., guys! Enough for one day. Any questions? [...] Just so you know your old man loves you, eh? (*Mulvaney's* 95-96, emphasis in the original)

On the surface, this quotation proves that the father is high in control and that he exerts it by having an open and honest conversation and providing the children with clear rules while at the same time displaying tenderness. However, it also reveals the dominant and sexist attitudes that Michael has toward women, considering them helpless and in need of male protection. This points out to his rigid gender-role schemes too.

In the second part of the book, the Mulvaney's parenting style is altered after Marianne's rape: it becomes an authoritarian parenting style. This occurs because the family structure is so rigid that it cannot resist such shifting personal circumstances and alterations of roles. Each of the members has been assigned a role according to her/his gender: specifically, Marianne was expected to be compliant and chaste; and her father was supposed to exert his will upon the whole family, which he considers his possession. This is why, as explained in the chapter "Fathers," Michael interprets Marianne's rape not only as her fault, but also as an attack on *his* property: his daughter.

Therefore, instead of undergoing a period of adaptation, the inflexible nuclear family becomes destroyed. The ending of the novel presents a state of regeneration of the family after the patriarchal figure of Michael (who has proved to be the most damaging element of its structure due to his incapacity to adapt) is no longer part of it.

Under the authoritarian style, the parents become more anxious and less receptive to their children's needs, and exert their authority in a

forceful and inflexible manner: they send Marianne away from home without telling her brothers, and do not allow her to come back even for the holidays. In fact, her father does never talk to her again. The old positive and fluent communication has suddenly evaporated; in fact, it was not actually so fluent as the characters thought. One of the main shocks for Corinne is the complications in communication that they experience: Marianne does not tell her mother about the rape, nor does she tell Patrick, to whom she was so close. Part of the reason behind this is Marianne's deep feelings of shame and guilt about the assault, but her mother also perceives the profound disappointment of having to admit that their relationships were not as perfect and honest as she thought. The characters were absolutely convinced of their own perfection, to the extent that they were blind to reality. Corinne herself soon does something similar by not discussing matters with her children: the most outstanding example is her and her husband's decision to send Marianne away without warning.

The changes in the family conventions are also marked by their abandonment of their old nicknames, which indicates that the old family codes are being broken by the realization of their previous blindness to their own imperfections; that is, the characters are starting to break free from the impositions of their fixed roles. Now, they can define and express who they are instead of being imposed certain traits.

The reaction of the children to their parents' change of attitude is hurt, incredulity and anger in the case of the three brothers; and resignation and understanding in the case of Marianne. However, they still exhibit the generally positive traits that the previous democratic parenting phase had instilled into them, because this is the style in which they were raised: even if this democratic style concealed the authoritarian traits that emerged after Marianne's rape, it still had positive effects in the children.

First, they have learnt how to face stressful events that they create: when Judd goes out alone at night and cuts his foot, he tends to it himself, knowing that he should not have gone out at that time. He deliberately does something that his parents would have disapproved of, and so when his decision has an unexpected and painful result, he assumes full responsibility for his actions. Plus, he knows that telling

his parents about the wound will probably result in a scolding. Thus, the acquisition of personal responsibility has become essential for the children. Moreover, as commented, Michael has instilled into them a sexist and patronizing attitude toward women, but they do not blindly absorb this: they apply their own morality and sense of responsibility to the situations they encounter. For instance, Patrick supports her sister unconditionally after her rape, even standing against their parents due to their rejection of her, by for example, refusing to go home for Christmas when he discovers that Marianne has not been invited. Patrick has been able to transform the sexist admonitions of his father urging his sons to protect women by treating his sister with the dignity and respect that their father lacks and accepting her present condition as a rape survivor.

Second, these children have acquired good social, emotional and cognitive measures. Marianne and Mike are extremely popular and have many friends; while Patrick is a more solitary boy, but this is due to a personal choice and not to social clumsiness. They all have an exceptional emotional capacity, which is mainly represented by Judd, whom in his role as the narrator is able to reminisce about the family's story with sensitivity and sympathy. The children's high self-confidence is also patent: Mike has leadership qualities, while Patrick always speaks his mind. Marianne is self-assured and outgoing, although these qualities, as well as her popularity, are destroyed by her rape and the subsequent detached attitude of her parents.

Third, the children are mostly independent; and as a result, they all follow their own path: Mike leaves home and joins the Marines, Patrick goes away to college, and Judd decides to stay at home to support his mother when his father starts to behave aggressively. Marianne is more dependent on her family and wishes to come back home after her banishment, but she eventually finds stability under her own terms. Their parents are hurt about some of these decisions; but they were the ones who taught their children to be responsible and think independently: still they do not seem to approve of their children's divergent conception of independence.

Fourth, in general terms, these children are non-violent. Patrick is the only one who exhibits violent tendencies when he abducts and

almost kills Zachary, but this has been motivated by the terrible abuse that Marianne has endured, and by the unfairness of his not being punished in any manner. In the end, Patrick decides against revenge and frees the rapist. Marianne herself declines to accuse her rapist Zachary Lundt, a decision which may be interpreted as a sign of her inclination toward forgiveness and tolerance.

In summary, in this novel the democratic parenting style is only enacted as long as the family circumstances are calm and peaceful, a period that is simultaneous with the family's illusion of being a perfect family. However, as soon as the circumstances suddenly change and the old roles are altered, the family's illusion is destroyed along with their previous parenting style, which evolves into authoritarian. It is relevant to notice, too, that unlike most of the parents of the corpus, Corinne and Michael generally apply the same parenting techniques. Initially, this appears to indicate the couple's solid bond, but the decision eventually appears to be the reflection of Corinne's submission to Michael. The seemingly ideal bond, then, was depended on the wife's submission to the husband.

### **2.3.3 Indifferent or Uninvolved Parents**

Indifferent or uninvolved parents lack both warmth and discipline: they are both unresponsive and undemanding; that is, they give the children few tokens of affection, and their control over them is low, since they appear to monitor their children's whereabouts and peer associates less carefully. Consequently, the communication with the parents is low as well. From this, we might deduce that the maturity expectations for the children are rather low. Pettit et al (qtd. in Ladd 11) found that mothers with less restrictive disciplinary styles (based on the degree of concern, constraint and reasoning displayed in response to hypothetical discipline situations), as well as those who endorsed the use of aggression, tended to have children who were less accepted and skilled amongst peers and more aggressive in the classroom. In general, children of indifferent parents are insecure, have low self-esteem and are inexperienced in building solid relationships, which may be detrimental to their social integration. At times, these children may

become involved in deviant and delinquent peer activities (Ladd 8; Maccoby and Martin qtd. in Ladd 8; and Palacios González 56-58).

Loretta, from *them*, is a good example of an indifferent parent. Her children have two fathers, Howard Wendall and Pat Furlong, who shall be considered only briefly in this section, since they do not consistently represent the indifferent parenting style. Therefore, the analysis of indifferent parents pivots around Loretta.

Loretta's first husband Howard is the biological father of Maureen, Betty and perhaps Jules. Howard shows traits of both the indifferent and authoritarian styles. As an indifferent father, he is mostly uninvolved in the children's education, leaving the task to his wife. As an authoritarian father, he sometimes gets drunk and physically assaults his family. Nevertheless, most of the time, he barely speaks to them and shows very little interest in them. This silence obstructs any communication among the family members, something that Jules resents: "I couldn't stand it, him being so quiet! [...] It got next to me and almost drove me crazy sometimes. Jesus Christ, he taught me all I need to know about quiet!" (*them* 135). In this case, Jules, who has an extrovert personality, plainly rejects his father's silence. Similarly, Maureen dislikes her mother's personality and does not want to resemble her.

The children's grandmother, Mama Wendall, who lives with the family for an extended period, usually assumes a more active parental role than Howard. She frequently exerts discipline in a forceful manner, so her style could be described as authoritarian. When Jules starts a fire in a barn as a small child, she whips him until he bleeds and tells him that he will end up in the electric chair and that she herself shall push the switch. The combination of Loretta's indifference and Mama Wendall's aggressive authority probably strain their relationship with the children, who do not really have much trust in any of them; nor in their violent and silent father Howard.

Loretta's second husband, Furlong, marries her when the children are teenagers, and after Mama Wendall is no longer living with the family but in a nursing home. He is the biological father of Loretta's younger child Randolph. Furlong employs authoritarian parenting methods, frequently endorsed with violence. After marrying Loretta, he

tries to be friendly to the children, who in general dislike him; but he soon becomes impatient, aggressive and physically abusive.

Before considering Loretta's parenting style, it is necessary to highlight that she treats each of her children very differently. This trait could be based on Loretta's impulsive nature and changes of humor, but also on the children's attitudes: whereas the witty and impulsive Jules is clearly Loretta's favorite, whom she indulges in many occasions; she is extremely demanding to the sensible and responsible Maureen, to whom she gives many responsibilities, unlike her other, more irresponsible children. She barely exerts any discipline over the rebellious and independent Betty and Randolph. She is, perhaps unconsciously, adapting her attitude to some of her children's most notorious traits. These patterns could be summed up in the following terms: Jules receives positive attention, Maureen is given negative attention, and Betty and Randolph generally have little attention from their mother. The reasons for favoring Jules seem to be basically two:

Between the baby Maureen and the child Jules, Loretta supposed she had to prefer Maureen, who, after all, was a female but she had the idea that Jules was the sharpest one: Mama Wendall believed that the first-born was always the sharpest. [...] She could never make up her mind whether Jules looked like Howard or like Bernie Malin [...] But all that energy! that charm! She lay awake beside her sleeping husband and dreamed of Bernie, imagining him alive [j] in her arms. Jules had Bernie's energy and charm, that was certain. (*them* 62)

So firstly, Loretta's mother-in-law, Mama Wendall, has put some preconceptions on her mind; and secondly, Jules comes to be a reflection of Loretta's first lover Bernie, who might be Jules's father, and whose violent and premature death have tinged him with romanticism in Loretta's mind. In any case, Loretta is clearly drawn to her first-born.

Loretta's warmth levels are rather low: she does not often manifest tenderness toward her children, often transferring to them her daily frustrations:

You little pests think you're so special but you don't know nothing! You, Jules, you look so smart-aleck but you don't know nothing! [...] Reeny kid, with your sour puss and your gawky neck, and you, Betty, you look like a pigeon or something that's going to have babies. (*them* 110)

Loretta also tends to mock her children, especially Maureen. This has a deep impact upon the girl's confidence, and seriously strains her relationship with her mother, to the extent that she feels "unmothered," as discussed in the chapter "Mothers." Maureen is not the only Oatesian character whose ego is damaged by another more confident person. As Creighton notes, Maureen shares this trait with Elena from *Do with Me* and Laney from *Childwold*, who are intimidated and overpowered by other assertive women, specifically, the mother figure: Loretta in *them*, Ardis in *Do with Me* and Arlene in *Childwold* (*Novels Middle* 59).

In *them*, Loretta's disciplinary techniques are rather inconsistent, and sometimes even forceful. She usually lets her emotions interfere with her judgement and treats the children accordingly. In her angry outbursts, she might slap them or lock them in a closet; while other times she shouts at them or says appalling things to them. For instance, after Jules is expelled from school, she tells him that he will end in the morgue. Mama Wendall reinforces this by making similar threats to Jules when he disobeys. However, the children are used to hear these threats and are not disturbed by them. At other occasions, Loretta feels exhausted and helpless about her children's restlessness: when Jules is a small child, she even gives him some sips of beer to calm him down. For her, as for some parents, dealing with young children is a time of feeling overwhelmed by a complex set of demands which do not always make sense or can be satisfied (Llewelyn and Osborne qtd. in White and Woollett 57).

Most often, Loretta simply complains about the children but takes little or no action to punish them. For example, when Betty loses a board game and asserts that it was stolen, her mother suspects that she is lying but simply comments: "'You probably stole it yourself, you,' Loretta said knowingly but without interest" (*them* 105). Their father Howard, who is also present, does not interfere at all. Curiously, Maureen, who exhibits more interest on this than their mother, is the one to question



Betty, to no avail. This demonstrates how Maureen sometimes assumes a parenting role in substitution for her parents' carelessness, similarly to Clara in *Garden*.

Loretta's lack of controlling measures could be rooted in her carefree and shallow personality. In Jules words, she "could absorb nothing, everything spilled out of her" (*them* 136). It is fair to remember, though, that Loretta has had an intricate life, and so her general indifference could be just a method of confronting it by trying not to be overwhelmed by pain or desperation. Other authors have commented on these traits as well. According to Friedman, Loretta's adaptability is based on selfishness, (understood here as self-absorption) which keeps her from the madness to which her father and mother succumbed. Her frequent spells of anger and tears culminate into an accommodating forgiveness of the past and a renewed hope for the future. She lacks depth and sensibility, but is able to adapt, to forgive and make (sometimes even keep) promises. For instance, she forgives her brother Brock for shooting her lover Bernie. She can forgive anything because she is almost impenetrable (*Joyce* 90). This impenetrable quality alludes to her general lack of sensibility, which prevents her from dwelling on problems for too long, or from being resentful at people.

Johnson remarks that Loretta is, like Clara, a woman of limited imagination but with an enormous capacity to adapt. Like Clara, she develops a knowing and sardonic exterior, and her freedom from reflection or self-examination saves her. She is capable of startling shifts (for instance, she initially hates her mother-in-law but she admires her in retrospect) that are necessary tools for surviving in an unstable and basically illogical environment (*Understanding* 76-77). This capacity of adaptation is precisely the trait that Michael Mulvaney does not possess: he is utterly unable to adapt to the changes and losses that his daughter's rape brings about.

Moreover, the parents' relative indifference in *them* is also influenced by the historical circumstances in the 1950s, when an attitude of active protection of children was not usually promoted within the socioeconomic environment portrayed in the novel. The family situation has certainly changed since the era of *Garden* (around

the Great Depression) when children were not so protected and highly valued as in later decades: in fact, child abuse, along with domestic violence, increased during the Depression (Harvey Green qtd. in “Psychological Impact Depression” n. p.), when child labor was common; it was only abolished in 1938, as Garraty remarks (755).

During the 1950s, many Americans reacted against the poverty of the Depression and turmoil of the Second World War by placing a renewed emphasis on the family: divorce rates slowed down, and women married earlier and had more children (Mintz “New Rules” 17). But still, public interest in abuse and neglect was practically nonexistent, as noticed by the political scientist Barbara Nelson (qtd. in Gelles 4). In fact, in *them*, set in this decade, the parents are not too concerned about their children, at least in the dejected area of Detroit they inhabit, where people appear to live for the moment due to their lack of a certain future. The parents in *them* warn children against dangers, but they do not monitor them too closely. These conventions will progressively change: in the 1970s, parents show much more concern for the children, as seen in *Mulvaney*s.

Then, in the 1980s, as seen in *Bird*, the children’s whereabouts were closely monitored. This decade featured an evolution from “protected childhood” into “prepared childhood.” Although in this decade middle-class parents tried to shelter their children from certain realities of adult life (such as sex, profanity or death), they gradually started to prepare them from an early age for life’s vicissitudes, because they were convinced that they could not protect them from dangerous or “ugly” realities, so they sought to educate them (Mintz “Family” 106). This is seen in the novel, where Krista’s mother imposes her authority over her but tries to explain the reasons for her restrictions.

As seen in *Carthage*, the twenty-first century promoted an increased conscience of the need of protecting children. This circumstance, along with the largely spread and immediate communication devices such as cell phones, resulted in children becoming much more sheltered than in the previous decades.

In *them*, Loretta’s lack of involvement becomes harmful for her daughter, whom she does not protect from the first aggression of his stepfather as explained in the chapter “Mothers”.

Loretta's maturity demands to her children are generally rather low. She expects very little from Betty and Randolph, who are usually absent from home, and is quite permissive toward her favorite child Jules. These three characters are willful and free: Jules has been independent since a very young age and significantly, he used to wander alone in the countryside even at the early age of five years old; and Betty creates her own gang in Detroit, something that Randolph will replicate some years later. The exception is Maureen, for whom maturity demands are much higher: Loretta compels her to do a series of housework tasks from which her siblings are exempted (although Jules does much housework without being asked). Her mother knows that she is her most reliable child in this respect and that she always follows rules, so she burdens her with further responsibilities, in sharp contrast to her siblings. Once more, we perceive how the child's own attitude and personality affects how the parents treat her/him; and how a parenting style can be adapted to different children. In this case, Loretta is demanding of Maureen without ceasing to be, in general, an indifferent mother.

As a consequence of this situation, Maureen often assumes a parental function. The girl understandably resents this, especially when her mother forbids her to get a job, something that will have tragic consequences and that she profoundly resents: "Why can't I get a job? [...] Why do I have to be home all the time? Why me, why not Betty? What's there to do with the baby [Randolph] that you can't do? How come Betty can run wild all she wants but I have to stay at home?" (*them* 183).

Overall, then, Loretta does not have a good communication with her children: "When Maureen tried to explain things to her, why she needed a new skirt or fifteen cents for the Red Cross Drive at school, Loretta often didn't hear her. Or she said, 'Blah-blah-blah'" (*them* 149). Loretta does not bother to listen to her children, both literally as in the previous quote and figuratively, for she does not believe what the children tell her. This is especially noticeable with Maureen, whom she frequently accuses of lying about her whereabouts and free-time activities: "Kids your age never tell the truth. I don't believe one word you say, kid!" (*them* 155). Loretta's continuous attacks are not based

on a real resentment to her daughter, but only on their opposed personalities and her utter incomprehension of Maureen's personal traits, which proves Loretta's lack of empathy. That is, Loretta cannot understand her daughter's quiet disposition, or even imagine how much she is hurting her with her taunts. In any case, the teasing strains Maureen to the extent that she starts wondering who she really is:

She could not understand. She wondered if maybe her mother was talking to the real Maureen, a girl who was hypocritical and selfish and sly. Was that the real Maureen? Sometimes when she was alone, walking along the street, she was taken by surprise seeing her reflection in a store window, a remote, ghostly reflection she never quite expected or recognized; it did not really seem herself. (*them* 171)

The irony about this is that Maureen is the only one of Loretta's children whose actual whereabouts she is informed about, since she frequently does not know where Jules or Betty are.

Children of indifferent parents are said to be insecure, but in *them*, this only applies to Maureen, who is so afraid of making mistakes that she re-checks her homework several times, and she even fears making a mistake when playing. Her siblings are much more self-assured, especially Betty, who is stubborn and confident. Moreover, none of Loretta's children have problems maintaining social relationships, since all of them have several friends throughout their lives. Some of these children may participate in deviant or delinquent peer activities: for example, Betty gets involved in some delinquent behavior with her gang. Her mother's attitude toward this is rather passive: she complains repeatedly but does not take any action to prevent or solve it.

#### **2.3.4 Permissive or Indulgent Parents**

Permissive or indulgent parents show warmth but lack discipline, that is, they are more responsive than demanding. Although they tend to be moderately warm, some of them are rather cool and uninvolved. Monitoring children in a kind and moderate manner can be effective because children are encouraged to be compliant and do what their

parents say, but this depends on the child's disposition, as we shall see in the case of Cressida from *Carthage*. Indulgent parents have tolerant attitudes toward their children's impulses, including sexual and aggressive impulses. As they are low in control, they avoid asserting their authority or imposing restrictions on their children's behavior, or punishing them. They make few demands for mature behavior and are fairly unconcerned about politeness. They encourage children to make their own decisions about issues such as bedtimes or watching television. Since they think that children's free expression is healthy, they are prepared to discuss diverse aspects of child-caring with them, so they have an honest communication. Moreover, since parents acknowledge their children's individuality and allow them to participate in decision making, these children commonly develop a positive sense of themselves and a sense of trust for other people. In other cases, however, they show little self-reliance and self-control, and tend to be aimless and impulsive. The permissiveness of these parents implies that children rarely have to cope with the consequences of their actions. These children are asked to make only a little effort, which results in their lack of a high level of prosocial conduct. They are more immature since they have received few maturity demands, but they are more cheerful and vivacious. When indulgent parenting includes permissiveness toward aggression, it forecasts children's aggressive reputation in the peer group (Maccoby and Martin qtd. in Ladd 8; Baumrind qtd. in White and Woollett 46, 48-49; and Palacios González 56-58).

In *Carthage*, Arlette and Zeno are indulgent parents. Their daughters, Juliet and Cressida, are presented in totally opposed terms: Juliet is kind, cheerful, sociable, and well-liked; while Cressida is a selfish, sarcastic and solitary girl. They are known, respectively, as "the beautiful one" and "the smart one," a construction which is, perhaps unwillingly, promoted by Arlette and Zeno.

Arlette and Zeno are warm to their daughters and protect them at all times, providing them with a comfortable middle-class life that protects them from external dangers and anxieties. As a consequence of the low maturity demands exerted upon her, Cressida becomes a rather spoiled girl, as her sister's boyfriend Brett notices:

Cressida's *will* was a force in the Mayfield household. [...] Even bossy Zeno deferred to her. Arlette rarely contradicted Cressida and often in her company grew quiet as if hoping to avoid a sharp or sarcastic remark from the "precocious" younger daughter. (*Carthage* 167, emphasis in the original)

This proves that Arlette is reluctant to have a confrontation with her daughter, perhaps because she feels that she would not be able to effectively exert her authority. That is to say, Arlette lacks the determination to apply disciplinary measures. At the same time this is motivated by the girl's fiery attitude, which proves that parenting styles are influenced by the children's attitudes and actions. Zeno has a similar attitude, since he does not scold Cressida for her behavior. On the contrary, he finds it amusing:

Zeno had teased Cressida about making her (girl) friends cry. Since middle school Zeno had teased Cressida without seeming to realize, or to acknowledge, what it might mean if what he were teasing his daughter about were true. (*Carthage* 298)

Obviously, Zeno has not really considered Cressida's real nature, or the problems that this may cause her in the future: mainly, as we shall see, her personality prevents her from acquiring intimate or significant relationships with others. Being tolerant to Cressida's impulses indirectly causes her not to refrain from being hostile toward her peers, whom she usually cruelly despises. That is, she replicates with her peers the antagonistic attitude she has at home, but in a more extreme manner, since she is placed among equals.

When Cressida is eleven years old, Arlette enters her room and discovers her writing in her journal. Cressida becomes outraged and she rudely yells to her mother: "*Go away! You're not welcome here! No snooping here!*" (*Carthage* 125, emphasis in the original). Baffled and hurt by her youngest child's aggressive response, Arlette is unable to react in any manner, and she exits the room. Despite the fact that Cressida's parents are not indifferent to rudeness (as indulgent parents

sometimes are), Cressida has impolite manners at times, and her parents seem reluctant, or maybe just unable, to put a remedy to them. This scene also proves that Cressida is not used to face the consequences of her actions, since she does not receive any reprimand. In fact, Arlette acquiesces to her daughter's demands to the extent that she "rarely entered her younger daughter's room except if Cressida was inside, and expressly invited her. She dreaded the accusation of *snooping*" (*Carthage* 71, emphasis in the original). Once again, we see how the child's reaction influences that of her parents. Thus, this immunity makes Cressida believe that she can always get her own way; and eventually contributes to, as well as reinforces, her inability to face the consequences of her acts. This is part of the reason (initially unacknowledged by her) why she does not come back home for a long time when she disappears: she cannot face the implications of her choices.

These parents are willing to discuss matters with their daughters. Cressida and Juliet are allowed to make their own decisions, which has a very positive outcome for such a mature young woman as Juliet; but Cressida, who has a more puerile conduct, has to face a lot of complications derived from this. As the Mayfields want their daughters to grow independently, their privacy is meticulously respected, to the extent that they hesitate to touch Cressida's laptop when the police request it for the investigation of her disappearance: "the Mayfields had said yes, of course. Though reluctant even to open the laptop themselves. To peer into their daughter's private life, how intrusive this was! How Cressida would resent it" (*Carthage* 95).

This situation stands as the extreme opposite to the position of children from previous decades, who were granted no privacy: in *them*, for instance, Furlong rummages Maureen's bedroom in search of her secret savings. Instead, Arlette and Zeno are so sensitive to their children's individuality that they do not ask questions about Juliet's sudden breakup with Brett, and they express total understanding and kindness toward Cressida when she decides to come back home.

Moreover, both Arlette and Zeno provide their daughters with a comfortable life and a good reputation which shelters them from stressful situations. The disadvantage of this is that, when Cressida goes

to the university and she does no longer enjoy that protection, she is unable to adapt to the new environment, as seen in the chapter “Children.” This is aggravated by the fact that, as it usually occurs with the children of indulgent parents, Cressida is so impetuous that she tends to act without previously reflecting and later regrets her actions. Likewise, she also exhibits traits of aimlessness and immaturity, which are mostly reflected in her wandering period after her disappearance and in the fact that she postpones considering her family’s pain about her for years.

Juliet is not as impulsive, immature or aimless as Cressida: she has all her future carefully planned and behaves responsibly. She, unlike Cressida, benefits from being allowed to make her own decisions. This demonstrates how the same parenting style has different effects in different children. For instance, Juliet, unlike Cressida, has a positive sense of herself and trusts others: she blindly supports Brett despite all his transformations upon returning from war (although this is problematic because she is unable to perceive that he has been completely altered by the experience), and she makes a great effort to get on well with her mother-in-law, who disapproves of her. Finally, Juliet is a cheerful girl, while Cressida is not. The reason for this may lie in Juliet’s easy and relaxed disposition and in Cressida’s insistence on searching for happiness on complicated grounds. First, Cressida is convinced that her family does not love her, a notion that will have terrible consequences, since she shall use this as a justification not to return to them after she goes missing.

The girl blames her family for not being affectionate enough, but the novel shows us the actual reason for this conviction:

She’d heard them—her family—talking and laughing together, their voices muffled, at a little distance, many times. When abruptly she’d gone upstairs to her room and shut the door to be alone—with her books, her “art”—knowing that her parents and her sister were baffled by her rudeness; yet knowing that soon, within minutes, they would cease to miss her, would forget about her, Zeno, Arlette, Juliet—relaxed and happy together. They’d become accustomed to Cressida’s behavior, within the



family. Relatives and friends understood. Allowances were made for Cressida. You wouldn't expect Cressida to answer with a smile when she was greeted, or make eye contact with most people [...] You'd hardly expect Cressida to sit still for long enough to eat—to try to eat—a meal [...] *Needing desperately to get away, and be alone. And when alone, her thoughts turning against her like maddened hornets.* (Carthage 354-355, emphasis in the original)

Therefore, this situation qualifies as a loop: Cressida is the one to reject her family and retreat from their company, and yet she resents the separation. She does not realize that she provokes this distance, or that she would probably be gladly received by her family (at least by her parents: as we shall see Juliet grows to resent her sister's bad manners, although she does not openly state this) should she decide to join them. Moreover, this quote reveals that, once more, Cressida receives a special treatment: she is exempted from basic social forms such as greeting cordially. This is yet another trait of Zeno and Arlette's indulgent style.

This situation illustrates White and Woollett's previous claim that not every parental attitude is to blame for specific characteristics of the children (49); or that (in Solomon's terms) not every characteristic of a child belongs to her/his vertical identity. In this case, the Mayfields behave in a certain manner as a response to their daughter's behavior. That is, Cressida has an unusual, brusque and often rude behavior, and her parents make concessions for her and excuse her behavior. As a result, ironically, Cressida misinterprets this as disinterest and lack of love on their part.

The divergent manner in which Arlette and Zeno treat their daughters is not only derived from the different personalities of the girls, but also by their age gap: it is frequent for parents to be more relaxed and permissive toward younger children, as in the case of Cressida, as Hart remarks: range restrictions imposed on first-borns are generally not imposed on later-borns, because parents think that the older siblings can chaperone the younger ones, and because parents

change and relax their ideas regarding the need for control over later-borns (qtd. in Bryant and DeMorris 172-174).

At the end of the novel, Juliet, furious at her sister for not having contacted them for years, is convinced that her behavior is their parents' fault:

when we were young girls together Cressida had the most maddening habits—tapping her foot, wriggling her foot, shifting her weight in her chair at dinner with a loud rude sigh; scratching her scalp, scratching her face, her armpits [...] oblivious of others as a little monkey. Did my parents believe “Cressie” was *cute*? Her sarcasm, her habit of interrupting others—particularly her older sister—did they think this was *charming*? The meanness with which she treated her few girlfriends—the supercilious way in which she spoke of “popular” classmates and many of her teachers—did they think this was *admirable*? (*Carthage* 475, emphasis in the original)

Moreover, it is asserted that Cressida has been diagnosed as being maybe “‘autistic’—or somewhere on the ‘autistic spectrum.’ Not shyness but resistance to looking at another’s face, meeting another’s eyes. Not hearing impaired but just *not hearing* which is a way of *not caring*” (*Carthage* 318, emphasis in the original). The possibility that Cressida has this disorder may contribute to explain some of her difficulties when engaging in pro-social behaviors. However, we cannot fully explore this possibility because this question appears in an extremely diluted manner in the novel: it is only fleetingly mentioned; and besides, as Carl Solomon and the World Health Organization (in the article “Autism Spectrum Disorders” n. p.) emphasize, the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex condition, whose causes and mechanisms are unknown.

ASD refers to a range of conditions and behaviors characterized by some degree of impaired social behavior, as well as a narrow range of interests and activities that are both unique to the individual and repetitively carried out (arm shaking is an example of these repetitive movements). ASD affects almost all aspects of behavior, as well as sensory experiences, motor functioning, balance, conscience of internal

processes, etc. The primary symptoms are handicapped speech or lack of speech; poor non-verbal communication; minimal eye contact; little interest in friendship; incapacity for spontaneous or imaginative play; reduced empathy, perspicacity and sociability; and diminished capacity for emotional reciprocity. Autistic children, nonetheless, establish some kind of bonds to others, at least partial bonds.

Cressida appears to possess some of these traits (particularly, a slightly impaired social behavior, little interest in friendship, avoidance of eye contact, reduced empathy, and diminished capacity for emotional reciprocity), but they cannot definitively be attributed to ASD. ASD commonly presents other co-occurring conditions such as epilepsy, depression, anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The level of intellectual functioning in individuals with ASDs is extremely variable: it extends from profound impairment to superior levels. If Cressida had this disorder, she would certainly be placed among the superior levels of intellectual functioning. ASDs begin in childhood and tend to persist into adolescence and adulthood. Some people with ASD can live independently (as Cressida); but others have severe disabilities that require life-long care. ASDs may significantly limit the capacity of an individual to conduct daily activities and participate in society. Besides, this disorder often negatively impacts the person's educational and social attainments as well as employment opportunities ("Autism Spectrum Disorders" n. p., Solomon 250-251, 253, 277).

Cressida's (possible) ASD is a good example of Solomon's horizontal identity since she has not inherited it from her parents. While Arlette is reluctant to admit that Cressida may have this disorder, Juliet is more convinced of this possibility, and, before becoming pregnant, she even worries that her children might have it.

### **2.3.5 Mixed Parenting Styles**

Not all parents consistently and exclusively apply a specific parenting style, as seen in the corpus, where some characters display a combination of several parenting modes which at times seem inconsistent. In other words, their parenting style's dominant traits belong to different parenting modalities. This combination of several

features composes the mixed style, which shall be discussed in the novels *Garden* and *Expensive*.

In *Garden*, the protagonist's parents, Carleton and Pearl, belong uniformly to one category: authoritarian and indifferent, respectively. It is interesting to note that this was altered in the revised version of the novel, which depicts them in a much positive light: they are less strict and much warmer and communicative toward the children. However, Clara's stepmother Nancy exhibits combined traits: she is alternatively authoritarian, indulgent or indifferent. When being authoritarian, she is strict toward Clara and orders her to take care of her brothers, Nancy's own baby, and the housework tasks. Therefore, Nancy's maturity demands are high, since she expects Clara to assume the role of a parent despite her young age. As Rich asserts (12), many women have been mothers in the sense of tenders and caregivers for the young, whether as sisters, aunts, nurses, teachers, foster-mothers, stepmothers. Clara always obeys her parents and indeed adopts the parental role that they impose on her. In fact, she is much more sensible than they are:

Clara waited while Nancy opened the bottle and stooped to pick up the bottle cap. Those little caps could cut somebody's feet; Clara went around picking them up [j] where Nancy and Carleton let them roll. (*Garden* 75)

Nancy has an unpredictable and volatile attitude toward the children, which oscillates between being warm (which is typical of indulgent parents) and cold (typical of authoritarian). For instance, when it is discovered that their neighbor Bert has raped his daughter and he is dragged away to his death by a lynching mob, Nancy takes the children home, comforting them and assuring them that everything will turn out fine: "Roosevelt, honey [...] you come on home an' I'll give you a pop" (*Garden* 81). Later on, visibly distressed about the situation, she loses her patience and yells at Clara: "You, you little bitch, [j] s top lookin' like that! You sick cow! Take care of your brother and shut up!" (*Garden* 83).

Nancy's communication with the children is defective; and she does not bother to explain things to them. This pattern is commonly found among authoritarian and indifferent parents. Indeed, most of the

times, Nancy is an indifferent parent, who manifests little preoccupation toward the well-being of the children: “So the hell with Rodwell and Roosevelt [...] If they want to get worse colds, let them,” she says when she finds out that Clara’s brothers are out in the rain (*Garden* 78). Despite this, Clara has a rather good relationship with her stepmother, though, because she accepts her as she is, rather careless.

In *Expensive*, Nada and Everett are primarily indifferent parents, although they also show characteristics of the indulgent style. These parents do not monitor too carefully their son’s whereabouts and activities despite the fact that he is just eleven years old. As Nada says, “I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it” (*Expensive* 174). This is usually an indifferent parenting characteristic; but Nada’s attitude is also clearly and consciously indulgent, even if she is possibly talking in abstract terms. As a result, just like in indulgent and permissive parenting, thus, discipline is loosely exerted.

Richard, who yearns for more parental attention, sadly assumes this freedom. He assures that the novel could be subtitled “Children of Freedom” (*Expensive* 114). This could refer, literally, to Nada’s determination to get rid of the responsibilities of a dedicated motherhood, and to the freedom of movement that Richard acquires as a result of his parents’ indifference toward him. Richard is hurt about this, because he interprets it as a lack of interest in him on the part of his mother.

In this case, communication is alternatively open and poor. This corresponds, respectively, to the indulgent and indifferent parenting styles. On the one hand, these parents clearly explain things to Richard, to the extent that they disclose to him details of their lives that he is perhaps too young to hear, such as the doubts his mother had about having an abortion or giving birth to him. On the other hand, there are many things left unsaid as well as difficulties establishing a fluent communication, as Nada bluntly tells her son: “You know, Richard, I’d like us to talk but there doesn’t seem to be anything to talk about” (*Expensive* 171).

Richard’s parents show unequal levels of warmth: they may be affectionate (as indulgent parents are) but also rather cool toward him, especially Nada, who even asks him how old he is. This coolness is

typical of the indifferent style (and sometimes, of the indulgent too). Despite her detached attitude toward her son, Nada has great expectations for him, as perceived when she makes him repeat an I. Q. test in order to obtain better results. Nada's expectations are probably well-intentioned; but they become a burden for Richard, who feels that he cannot live up to them, and that his mother's love is dependent on his success (although she has never explicitly stated this). In summary, Richard receives an unequal attention from his mother, which grades from indifference and frequent abandonments to excessive expectations on him.

On the other hand, Elwood is absent most of the time, working. This prevents him from spending time at home, and thus creating a close emotional bond to his son. Elwood does make some efforts to be affectionate toward his son, but this becomes complicated due to the limited amount of time they spend together and to Elwood's little tact: he is prompt to bring age-inappropriate themes up, for instance.

As explained in the chapter "Fathers," Richard's dissatisfaction with him comes from the fact that he would like his father to be more dominant and aggressive, qualities that the man, a ruthless businessman, indeed possesses, as Richard will discover at the end of the novel.

Just like permissive parents, Elwood is moderately warm with his son. Since he is often absent from home due to his job, he is not used to having a close rapport with his son who in general despises and rebuffs him, considering him clumsy and unworthy of his beloved mother. Similarly, as a permissive father mostly focused on his job, Elwood is rather uninvolved with his son at times.

For most of the novel, Richard focuses on his parents' detachment toward him. As it usually occurs with children of indulgent and indifferent parents, Richard has little self-reliance, to which the unequal attention he receives from his mother and the fact that his father is absent most of the time might have contributed. Richard thus shows little self-control, and perhaps his attraction to violence is partly an attempt to exert some control over his life, and to prove his worth. This is also the reason why he constructs the fantasy of murdering his mother.

Neither Elwood nor Nada conform to Richard's ideal of what parents should be. In short, *Expensive* revolves around Richard's dissatisfaction and disenchantment over Elwood and Nada's parenting style. As his mother tells him, he is "too critical of adults" (*Expensive* 173).

In the present chapter, we have discussed the transformation that a couple undergoes once they have children by following the case of Helene and Jesse from *Wonderland*. This has served to introduce topics such as control and possession within the family, which has proved how patriarchal expectations of what a husband or wife should be may influence and distort the perception that the characters have of one another. Moreover, the analysis of parenting styles has provided an introduction to the main themes of the novels of the corpus, while examining the mutually influential bonds that develop between parents and children. Additionally, this section has also demonstrated how authoritarian parenting styles have decreased in favor of more democratic and egalitarian styles.





### 3 MOTHERS

The analysis of motherhood that this chapter presents is based on the idea that, as Welldon observes, women's capacity of becoming impregnated and giving birth affects not only their emotional lives, but also their mental representations of their bodies, as well as their physical bodies themselves (52). Very often, motherhood is distorted by the influence of patriarchy.

The term "patriarchy," Connell explains, came into use around 1970 to describe the system of male domination (most specifically, as we shall explain in the next chapter, this domination was exerted by hegemonic forms of masculinity). Early women's liberation writing often interpreted the family as the site of oppression, and theorists documented wives' unpaid labor for husbands, mothers' imprisonment at home and men's prerogatives in daily life. In time, the feminist focus shifted from domestic unpaid labor to men's aggression on women (domestic violence, rape, etc.) (*Masculinities* 41).

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the enactments of motherhood in several novels of the corpus, namely, in the characters from *Garden*, *Expensive* and *Wonderland*. In order to provide a unified theoretical frame, we shall focus on Adrienne Rich's classical work *Of Woman Born* (first published in 1976) and her discussion of the two main ways in which motherhood can be understood: motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. Apart from this, Rich's theories shall be completed with references to Cohen and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein's essay "The War over the Family Is not over the Family" (1988), focused on how the right-wing and feminists have understood the role of women at home and outside the home; Sharon Hays's book *Las contradicciones culturales de la maternidad* (1996), which analyzes the ideology of "intensive mothering" and the inconsistencies that arise from it; as well as several articles by Luce Iriagaray, among other works. Taking all these approaches into account, this chapter

presents three main divisions: the first one is dedicated to mothers, the second, to mother-daughter relationships, and the third, to mother-son relationships.

The first section is inaugurated with a discussion about how motherhood has been defined and interpreted, taking pregnancy as a departing point to illustrate our theory in the novels *Garden* and *Wonderland*. We next analyze the interconnections between women and the working arena by contemplating the convergence of the productive and reproductive spheres and the conflicts arising from it in the novels *Expensive* and *Bird*. Finally, the question of abortion is considered in the light of *Expensive* and *Wonderland*. In the second section, we contemplate three main types of bonds between mother and daughter, namely, balanced relationships in *Mulvaneys* and *Carthage*; deserting mothers in *Garden*, *Wonderland* and *them*; and overprotecting mothers in *Bird*. Finally, the third part presents the mother and son relationship in *Expensive* and *Garden*, considering multiple aspects such as the Oedipus complex that both novels present.

### 3.1 MOTHERHOOD

As Rich argues, the words “mother” and “mud” (as earth, slime, the matter of which the planet is composed, the clay of which “man” is built) are extremely close in many languages: “mutter,” “madre,” “mater,” “materia,” “moeder,” “modder.” This etymology evokes the vegetation and nourishment that emerges out of the earth-womb, just like the human child comes out of the woman’s body. In fact, the expression “Mother Earth” still has currency, although it has acquired some archaic and sentimental undertones (108). This etymology points to the traditional association of women with nature, which has been understood in both positive and negative terms, as Carolyn Merchant argues: women have been identified with nature and the earth as nurturing mothers, benevolent beings who take care of human needs within a planned and ordered world; and, alternatively, women have been linked to a wild and violent nature, and with chaos (qtd. in Paterna and Martínez 34).

We might conclude that women’s creative capacity has been praised and respected; while at the same time, women have been often

portrayed as easily over-excited and hysterical, a myth that has provided an excuse to counterbalance the power that reproduction grants them by infantilizing and controlling them. Therefore, the subordination of women takes an interesting turn: it is based upon certain biological conditions that have been regarded as natural, but at the same time, have been distorted to fit into oppressive ideologies.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich distinguishes two meanings of the term “motherhood” that represent a crucial conceptual departing point for this chapter. The first one is “motherhood as experience,” or the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction and to children. The second one is “the institution of motherhood,” an ideology aimed at ensuring that this potential (as well as all women) remain under male control (13). In the following paragraphs, we shall explain in detail each one of these views.

Motherhood as experience is linked to the female body (most specifically, to the reproductive organs like the womb) along with a series of physical, biological processes like pregnancy, birth, lactation, feeding, etc. Motherhood as experience is also associated with Julia Kristeva’s semiotic phase. Specifically, the instinctual processes may be linked with Kristeva’s work on the configuration of the signifying process of language, in particular, with what she calls its semiotic phase. Kristeva posited the connection between mind and body, culture and nature, matter and representation by insisting both that bodily drives are discharged in representation, and that the logic of signification is already operating in the material body.

In “Revolution in Poetic Language,” first published in 1974, Kristeva presents her theory about the signifying process, arguing that it is composed by two inseparable modalities: the semiotic and the symbolic, which may present different modes of articulation. The subject, along with the signifying system he produces, is always both semiotic and symbolic (Kristeva 92).

The semiotic is related to Freud’s notion of instinctual drives or impulses, the unconscious, and the pre-Oedipal (Chanter “Revolution” n. p.). In Oliver’s words, the semiotic element is the bodily drive as it is discharged in signification. It is associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices. As the discharge of drives, it is

also associated with the maternal body, the first source of rhythms, tones, and movements for every human being since we all have resided in that body. For Kristeva, the maternal function is crucial for the development of subjectivity and access to culture and language. Kristeva argues that maternal regulation is the law before the Paternal Law, and calls for a new discourse of maternity that acknowledges the importance of the maternal function (n. p.).

The semiotic drives articulate what Kristeva calls “chora,” a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is full of movement and regulated. The chora (a term taken from Plato) denotes an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral phases. It is generated to attain a signifying position (Kristeva 93-94): “The chora is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic” (Kristeva 94).

The chora is a maternal receptacle, a generative matrix. It is neither sign nor signifier, neither model nor copy. The chora is pre-symbolic but it can be named and spoken of by means of a process that converts the semiotic into the symbolic, conferring on the semiotic the order, constraint, or law of culture that it resists. Kristeva constitutes the semiotic by naming it, even as its mobile forces elude conceptualization. The very utterance involves a loss, a betrayal of what language attempts to say; but this is a necessary betrayal, because the semiotic relies upon the symbolic for its articulation even if it suffers a transformation in the process of coming to representation. In sum, the subject cannot repudiate the symbolic, neither can it do without the semiotic (Chanter “Revolution” n. p.). The symbolic, mainly associated with the father, shall be explored in the chapter “Fathers.”

Moi explains Kristeva’s signifying process in the following terms: significance is a question of positioning. Hence, the semiotic continuum must be split in order to produce signification. The splitting of the chora is the so-called *thetic* phase. It enables the subject to attribute differences and thus signification to what was the endless heterogeneity of the chora. Kristeva, following Lacan, argues that the mirror phase is the first step that allows the constitution of objects detached from the

chora. The Oedipal phase, with the threat of castration, is the moment in which the process of separation is fully culminated. When the subject enters the symbolic order, the chora will be more or less successfully repressed: it will be perceived only as a pressure on or within the symbolic order: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences. The chora constitutes, then, the disruptive dimension of language (Moi 13).

The semiotic and the chora are then interpreted as disruptive elements of a language which is basically subjected to the Law of the Father is its symbolic mode. Similarly, motherhood as experience may be transformed, due to the interference of patriarchal ideology, in a disruptive element of motherhood, namely, motherhood as institution. Like the symbolic function of language, the institution of motherhood has been heavily controlled by patriarchy, which in fact

could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore, [women] have to be treated as axioms, as “nature” itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, “alternate life-styles” for certain individuals are tolerated. (Rich 43)

One of the most insidious effects of the institution of motherhood is its tendency to distort or destroy the experience of motherhood by means of diverse strategies. One of these strategies is precisely the reduction of the female identity to its mothering role to the detriment of any other dimension, such as personal fulfilment or the development of a professional career.

The interconnections between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution are extremely complex. As Sharon Hays claims, natural or biological processes have been employed as the justification for certain ideological approaches to motherhood such as “intensive mothering,” a gendered marked ideology that encourages mothers to dedicate an enormous amount of time, energy and money to raise their children. This model, prevalent in the United States (where, however, not all mothers adhere to it), requires the mother to raise the child; and if the mother is not available, it expects another woman to do

it. For these women, the child must be a priority among all other jobs and activities. This insistence has been justified on biological bases, for example, by relating a mother's compromise to her child to the fact that she produces estrogens and milk. However, we must be aware that over this "natural" base there are several layers of socially constructed elaboration and reinforcement (15, 30-31, 38).

Rich rejects the reduction of the female identity merely to motherhood as experience, but also denounces the oppression that motherhood as institution has placed upon women. According to Rich, the institution of motherhood has been

a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between "private" and "public" life [...]. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. (13)

The origins of motherhood as institution are deeply rooted in our culture. In *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Nancy Chodorow argues that the subordination of women is motivated by a pattern of upbringing in which women are the primary caregivers, and that forbids girls to experience a necessary independence while it provides boys with an excessive independence that alienates them from the capacity of nurturance (3, 7, 209). To avoid this, a new model of childrearing has to be constructed in which both parents take an active caretaking role (Cohen and Katzenstein 40).

Therefore, girls and boys have been traditionally brought up to see motherhood as the only option for women; that is, as a natural instinct for them. As Rich suggests, motherhood as experience implies a natural quality of which motherhood as institution is deprived. Thus, although it has been defined and justified as something natural, the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not a natural "human condition," any more than rape or slavery are, Rich warns. On the contrary, the institution of

motherhood has a history and depends on an ideology, which comprises, among other precepts, the regulation of women's reproductive power by men, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology and the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers. In fact, women who refuse to become mothers are not only emotionally suspect but also dangerous, since they refuse to continue the species and deprive society from the emotional leaven of a mother's suffering (Rich 34, 169). Irigaray confirms this male domination over women even in their most private aspects: "[e]verywhere and in all things, [men] define women's function and social role, and the sexual identity they are, or are not, to have" (35).

The institution of motherhood is formed by multiple interconnected realities that invariably influence (and in many cases deform) the relationship of mothers and children. Among these realities, we find marriage conceived as the arena of economic dependence and the guarantee to a man of "his" children; the laws regulating contraception and abortion; the denial that the work done by women at home is a part of "production;" the inadequate child-care facilities in most parts of the world; the unequal wages women receive, forcing them into dependence of a man; the solitary confinement of "full-time motherhood;" the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibilities; the psychoanalytic castigation of mothers; the pediatric assumption that the mother is inadequate and ignorant and the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family (Rich 275-276).

Most of these situations are replicated throughout Oates's work. The disregard for domestic work, traditionally done by women, is clearly seen at the beginning of *them*, where young Loretta complains about the little regard that these tasks receive. The adversities that working mothers have to face are depicted in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*,<sup>20</sup> where Rebecca works for a meager salary in a factory and is forced to leave her child in the care of a neighbor. In this very novel, we can also perceive how men hold rights over children but assume minimal responsibilities over them: Rebecca's husband Tignor does

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<sup>20</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Gravedigger's*.

only meagerly economically contribute to raise their son. The solitary confinement of “full-time motherhood” is seen in *Wonderland*, where Helene, whose husband Jesse works long hours, abandons her own job after giving birth to raise their daughters. The psychoanalytic castigation of mothers implies that mothers are held responsible for the outcome of their children’s lives: this is found in *Expensive*, where Nada is blamed by his son for his unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The burden of emotional work upon women in the family is seen in the short story “Ruth” from the collection *The Goddess and Other Women*,<sup>21</sup> where the husband expects his wife to construct and maintain the bonds with other family members, while he remains distant and unconcerned about them. Finally, the questions of abortion and the imposition of feelings of guilt upon mothers are also prominent in the corpus, especially in *Expensive* and *Wonderland*.

All these situations revolve around the concept of power, which is central to patriarchy. As Rich remarks, by controlling the mother, the father secures his possession of the children, and by controlling the children he ensures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death (that is, the hope that he will leave his legacy upon earth after he dies). Powerlessness may have effects such as lassitude, self-negation, guilt and depression; or perhaps psychological keenness, shrewdness, alert and a practiced observation of the oppressor. The only aspect in which most women have felt their own power in a patriarchal sense (i.e., as control over another) has been motherhood, and even in this aspect they have been controlled (64-65, 67). Apart from this brief power over the child, women have experienced power in two main ways, both of them negative. First, they have experienced male’s power over them, and, like other dominated groups, have learned to manipulate and seduce, or to internalize men’s will to make it theirs, an action that men have at times perceived as “power” in women. However, it is in fact a strategy by which women disguise their own feelings in order to obtain favors or literally to survive (Rich 68). This is recurrently seen in the corpus: female characters, especially from Oates’s early work, are unable to claim power in her own name, and so they claim it indirectly, through the

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<sup>21</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Goddess*.



figure of their husbands, lovers, or sons, as plainly seen in *Garden*, where Clara decides to marry a wealthy man in order to secure her son's survival, as well as her own.

Second, women have also interpreted men's powerfulness as a measure of human's aspirations. In fact, acquiring some link with male power was the only available way for many women to share power (as seen, again, in *Garden*). For most women, the notion of power has been linked with maleness and the use of force. Women have also noticed male's fantasies about female power, their perception of independent women as freaks of nature, unsexed, frigid, castrating, perverted and dangerous, as well as their fear of the maternal women as "controlling" and their preference for malleable women. Commonly, the feeling that lies beyond these perceptions is fear of women, but this has been overlooked until some post-Freudians pointed it out (Rich 70-71).

The subsequent sections deal with some of the most significant experiences for mothers: the process of childbirth, along with the question of legitimacy of the progeny; abortion; and the mother's relation to work. All these experiences have been radically influenced by motherhood as institution.

### **3.2 PREGNANCY**

The transformation of the experience of motherhood into a social institution starts in pregnancy, when the patriarchal social order places certain expectations and demands on pregnant women.

The first of these expectations for pregnant women is to be married. The legitimacy of children is a crucial concept for motherhood as institution. Under this conception, motherhood can only be "sacred" (that is, valid and respectable) if the offspring are "legitimate" and the children bear the name of a father who legally controls the mother (Rich 42).

Apart from this, when a woman becomes pregnant, she is treated differently by other people (White and Woollett 19). Rich agrees with this assertion:

As soon as a woman knows that a child is growing in her body, she falls under the power of theories, ideals, archetypes, descriptions of her new existence, almost none

of which have come from other women (though other women may transmit them) and all of which have floated invisibly about her since she first perceived herself to be female and therefore a mother. (61-62)

All these preconceptions seem to disregard the complexity of such experience by reducing it to a limited cluster of legitimate and socially accepted reactions, feelings and symptoms. A common tendency is, for instance, to infantilize pregnant women, perhaps to try to repress the empowerment that their new status as creators of life could provide them with. Some of those who infantilize women are men, perhaps moved by their wish to downplay the capacity of giving birth that they lack.

In contrast with the artificiality of this infantilism, pregnancy may cause a set psychological changes which accompany the physical and social changes; namely, a fear of self-transformation which might be experienced as the extinguishing of an earlier self (Rich 167). Thus, White and Woollett argue, women's adjustments to pregnancy reflect their personalities, their coping strategies and their adjustments to other life events. Some women, for instance, feel a loss of control over their body and their lives in general (19). Besides, during this period, women often learn, usually through painful self-discipline, those qualities which are supposed to be innate in them, such as patience, self-sacrifice and the willingness to repeat the routine chores of socializing a person (Rich 37).

The deeply ingrained belief that these are innate qualities that justify the assignment of women exclusively to domestic and motherly roles leads Rich (22) to coin the label "natural mothers" to refer to women who find their main gratification in being all day with small children, living at their pace without further identity traces. Helene from *Wonderland*, along with Maureen from *them*, acutely feel the burden of this ideal: they share the same feeling of being trapped and having no other option available than becoming mothers and wives.

The notion of "natural mother," Rich affirms, assumes that the isolation of women and children at home must be taken for granted and that a mother's love is unconditional and selfless: she is expected to love her children at all times. That is, mother-love is supposed to be

continuous and unconditional, and love and anger are not expected to coexist (actually, female anger is a threat to the institution of motherhood). Rich asserts that mothers often experience a socially unacceptable anger toward their children. She also argues that the psychopathological violence that sometimes mothers exert is rooted in the inhuman high expectations, demands and pressures that the patriarchal society places on them. According to Rich, motherhood without autonomy or without choice is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control (46, 224, 263-264). For a mother, then,

[l]ove and anger *can* exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not “loving”; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. This “powerless responsibility” as one group of women has termed it, is a heavier burden even than providing a living—which so many mothers have done, and do, simultaneously with mothering—because it is recognized in some quarters, at least, that economic forces, political oppression, lie behind poverty and unemployment; but the mother’s very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has “failed” her children. (Rich 52, emphasis in the original)

Basing a woman’s identity solely on her reproductive capacity becomes a distorting element for her self. This distortion emerges from the second type of motherhood that Rich has coined, motherhood as institution.

To avoid the negative effects of such a distorted experience of motherhood, Rich emphasizes the importance of constructing a self apart from that of the “mother,” since for her, “[m]otherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (37, emphasis in the original).

Oates has explored the complexities of motherhood through many of her female characters; and in her work, she offers a panorama of

motherhood experiences and the effects caused by the distortion of these experiences through the interference of the patriarchal ideology.

### **3.2.1 Legitimate and Illegitimate Pregnancy and Motherhood: Clara**

Although the question of children's legitimacy is now a bit antiquated, in *Garden*, Clara gives birth in 1937, during the Great Depression, and the social contempt for unmarried mothers then is explicitly alluded to in the novel: Clara is a single girl, and so the apparently high esteem that her condition as a mother could bring to her is revoked as long as she is not married and thus legitimized as a mother by the social order. Therefore, Clara feels mortified when attending a medical revision without a wedding band, since everybody in the waiting room notices and rudely stares at her. Despite her embarrassment, Clara decides not to hide her hands. Through the novel, Clara will be consistently proud of her life choices.

Even before becoming pregnant, Clara is fully aware of the restrictions of patriarchy, who expects women to be dependent on men:

Clara felt warm and oppressed. [j] there was not getting around what she had to face up to. This was the way life would be, then. But did all women have to go through it? [...] There had been nothing else in the world for them, nothing, except to give themselves to men, some man, and to hope afterwards that it had not been a mistake. But how could it be a mistake? There was no other choice. (*Garden* 134)

She feels that there is no other way for women to live, that they do not have a voice of their own to make decisions; but at the same time, she states that she wants to become more than a mother: "I want more things than just babies like my ma and Nancy [her stepmother] and everybody else! [...] I like babies but I want more than that" (*Garden* 125). However, she does not feel that she is in any position to decide: "There's nothing else for me to do with my life except get married," she concludes (*Garden* 134). In the end, she will turn these restrictions to her favor.

When she gets pregnant, she is in love with her lover Lowry who has recently left for Mexico, and she reflects that even if he dies in that country, he will live through the baby. Indeed, she sees Lowry in her son, and she commonly refers to him as “Lowry’s baby” (*Garden* 206), which corroborates Rich’s idea that sometimes illegitimate children may represent the incorporation of the lover into the woman’s body (159-160). Even if her lover abandons the mother or if they have to depart, the child will always bear a part of him and come to represent him. This association prompts Clara to experience contradictory emotions:

As often as she thought of the baby — which was nearly always — she thought of Lowry [...] wondering what he was doing at the moment and if he ever thought of her, knowing that the energy she needed to keep hating him was more than he deserved. (*Garden* 204)

She certainly misses Lowry, but she also dislikes giving him such power over her.

Clara has a good psychological adaptation to pregnancy, and the period just after Lowry leaves for Mexico and she meets Revere marks the beginning of her taking an increased control over her own life. From this point on, she gains a new awareness of the past and present events of her life. She dreams of things no longer “happening” to her; but about her making them happen:

The day Clara took her life into control was an ordinary day. She did not know up until the last moment exactly how she would bring all those accidents into control [j] She was sixteen now, and by the time the baby was born she would be seventeen. Every morning [...] she woke up to the clear, unmistakable knowledge of what had happened to her and what it meant. The dreaminess of the past two weeks had vanished. She stared long and hard at things. It might have been that she didn’t trust them — that she wanted to make sure they stayed still, kept their shapes, identities. (*Garden* 194)

Interestingly, Clara has a better physical and mental adaptation to pregnancy than other mothers from the corpus such as Nada or Helene, even if hers is a socially unacceptable pregnancy because she is not married.

In clear contrast with the tendency to infantilize pregnant women as a strategy to keep their reproductive capacity under control, Clara assumes control over her life when she is pregnant, acquiring a new adult maturity: she yearns for permanent things in her life, that is, for a solid sense of financial and even physical security which she barely could enjoy before. At this point, she is convinced that she has attained it; however, even if Clara's agency has undoubtedly increased, this sense of control is fleeting. As we shall explain, the events of her life and the choices of those around her will eventually escape her control. This circumstance is anticipated at the very beginning of the book, as Johnson highlights: the truck accident that inaugurates the novel causes Clara premature birth and this marks her life, full of uncontrollable forces (*Understanding* 31). In time, Clara's son Swan would feel trapped by the deterministic forces that seem to rule his life too.

In any case, after becoming pregnant, Clara is ready to leave her adolescent dreams behind and become an adult. Although she still loves Lowry, she stops depending on him, and goes on with her life. To cope with Lowry's loss, she evokes him through their still unborn baby:

She thought about the baby all the time, and through it she thought of Lowry, who would be kept alive this way even if [...] he someday really did die. He would stay alive through it and its eyes might be like his, or his mouth or something about it — and it would answer her when she called it, come running when she called no matter how far away it was. (*Garden* 194-195)

The baby thus fills the gap left by her lover's departure.

Although Clara is not initially too enthusiastic about having children, after her baby is born she seems to be able to experience motherhood on a more instinctual level, and thus she is able to adapt to the baby's rhythms by "sleeping when he slept and wakening when he

woke, fascinated by his face and the tiny eyes” (*Garden* 220), while at the same time experiencing ambiguous feelings:

She imitated the baby’s patience, [...] the turning of the days into nights and the relentless trance-like motion of the seasons, feeling herself sinking down to a depth that was not quite unconscious but where all feelings, emotions of love and hate, blended together in a single energy. (*Garden* 227)

In general, Clara has a positive adaptation to her son, although there is an explicit mention to the interconnected emotions of love and anger mentioned by Rich, which have been traditionally overlooked or considered unacceptable, because mothers are regarded as essentially loving and nurturing at all times. This view ignores the complexities and difficulties that the role entails which may cause divergent feelings.

Although the dislocations and distortions affecting the experience of motherhood in the other novels get blurred in Clara’s case, having Swan is a contradictory experience: as an illegitimate child, he is the cause of social despise and scorn which limits her chances of self-realization; but later on, her child is the key to marriage which opens the gates of a world of economic comfort for her, granting her access to a better social position. Given that Clara is a single teenager with a meager job in a conservative town far away from her Family System of Origin, raising her son alone would have been extremely complicated for her for socioeconomic reasons; but she is able to turn her disadvantage into an advantage by fooling a wealthy man into believing that the child is his.

According to White and Wollett, single parenthood is often a short-term experience, since many single mothers go on to marry or to establish a long-term relationship (27). By persuading Revere that the child is his son, Clara starts a long-term relationship with him as a way out of her misery, and eventually marries him thus legitimating her motherly status. This new family is a blended family or stepfamily, because the couple has children from a previous union. Moreover, although Revere thinks that he is Swan’s biological father, he is just Swan’s social and legal father.

Clara is using her limited resources in order to survive. She is satisfied of the results, because not only has she been able to turn a potentially complicated experience of motherhood (given her inexperience and the lack of support from others) into a more comfortable and economic stable situation, but she has also been able to adapt to her baby and have a rather positive rapport with him. As a result, Friedman notices, Clara's pregnancy represents her most fulfilled period (*Joyce* 192).

In this respect, Oates compares her to the main character of her novel *Blonde*, a fictionalized account of Marilyn Monroe's life:

Clara is a precursor of Norma Jeane Baker [...] She too must "sell" herself in America—somehow! She is desperate, and out of that desperation springs cunning. She marries a man who will honor and support her and shield her against the world that destroyed her mother, Pearl. She marries a man to give her son a name and a place in life. ("Conversations" 183)

In this way, Clara is able to use the restrictions of the patriarchal institution of motherhood for her own benefit: first, to escalate, by means of marriage, the social ladder and give a legitimate surname (and thus, social respectability) to her son; and second, to provide him with an education and cultural life she could not have but nonetheless values. Providing their children with a high-quality education is a frequent objective of mothers from working classes, as Hays remarks (144).

Clara uses her son as a tool to gain some sense of control which she has been denied until this point, because she has been tending to her siblings, taking care of the house, waiting for her lover Lowry to visit her. Hers was a passive role, and now, by means of Swan, she can indirectly claim some power. As Rich argues,

[p]owerless women have always used mothering as a channel—narrow but deep—for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them. [...] [Her child] is a piece of reality, of the world, which can be acted on, even modified, by a woman



restricted from acting on anything else except inert materials like dust or food. (38)

As we shall explain, this indirect claim for power will become problematic, precisely because Clara is not actually gaining this power for herself, or on her own name, but through her child.

Significantly, although Clara allows Revere to give the baby his legal first name, she provides him with the name that the whole family will use. This comes as a symbol of her determination to affirm her motherly status: “Revere named the baby Steven, and Clara said that was a fine-sounding name, but her own name for him was Swan” (*Garden* 221). She considers that the baby is hers, since it “had come out of her body and had now taken on life of his own” (*Garden* 221). And thus, she makes her claim over the baby, just as she has claimed her own life. Oates emphasizes Clara’s agency over her own life:

Clara is certainly not a passive victim. Even Carleton, her father, is a driven, passionate individual. [j] If anything, Clara is too manipulative, as she acquires more and more power as the wife of a well-to-do but unreflective farmer and investor. (“Conversations” 183)

The naming of the child is one of the prerogatives of patriarchy. It symbolically implies the control of a woman’s progeny by the father.

Irigaray analyzes the process of naming and explains how the navel, which is the most indissoluble mark of birth, “the most irreducible trace of identity,” is eventually significantly replaced by the child’s proper name (39). According to this symbology, the umbilical cord comes to represent the connection of the mother to the child, as well as one of the most primordial sources of identity. As Irigaray argues, the cutting of the umbilical cord is one of the most dramatic separations of a subject, which has been extensively downplayed by studies such as psychoanalysis in favor of analyzing the father-son bond: “the phallic penis takes back from the mother [and the umbilical cord] the power to give birth, to nourish, to dwell, to centre” (38). Thus, the naming of children falls outside the realm of the mother’s influence: it represents the right of the father, who also imposes his surname on

him (and on his wife). Hence, Clara, who is soon to be displaced in her power over her son by marrying Curt Revere, decides to counterbalance his naming of the child as a Revere with her own name for him, Swan, which thus functions as a remembrance of their old physical bond of the umbilical cord.

Marrying Revere grants Clara access to a world of material possessions she had wished for since she was a child from a mainly deprived family. Clara's choices are symbolized in the novel by means of the American flag, which first appears when Clara steals one from a garden as a teenager. Years later she asks Revere to buy a flag, which becomes a symbol of her new status, of her having achieved a piece of the American dream, but mainly through Revere's intercession. As Daly asserts, material gain cannot provide Clara with full satisfaction, since there are other frustrations in her life that remain unsatisfied: marrying Revere certifies her final renunciation to complete her personal dream of self-fulfillment through education. Clara has never had the opportunity of getting an education which would have liberated her from, in Daly's words, the tragic ritual sacrifice in which she plays a part by marrying Revere (33). Thus, as Daly argues, the possession of the flag does not imply that Clara's American dream is achieved, because her dream cannot be fulfilled exclusively by material possessions: she had yearned to expand her consciousness and imagination, until she faced the traumatic reality that survival entailed marrying the Father (33), which means legitimating her motherly status to make it fit the demands of the social institution of motherhood.

At one point, Clara reveals her yearn for an education to Swan:

I would give anything to be smartj You think I like the way I am? All my life there were people around me who could see farther than I could and backwards farther too — I mean into the past. History, things that happened and get written down. And they could understand life. But I couldn't. (*Garden* 373)

This is one of the reasons why she would like her son to have the educational chances she has missed, and why she is so hurt upon his renunciation of them. As the previous quotation suggests, Clara feels

somehow erased from existence, just as her name is significantly absent from the title of the three parts of the novel: “Carleton,” “Lowry” and “Swan.” Clara is the link among these characters, for whom, as Johnson argues, the young Clara seems to represent the possibility of transcendence: she is a comfort to her father, offers her passionate love to Lowry and finally gives birth to Swan. With her spontaneity, resilience, and sensual power, the youthful Clara is emblematic of a garden spiritually untouched by the American machine (*Understanding* 45-46). She embodies the potential and strength for growth that Oates respects: “I have great admiration for those females who I know from my own life, my background, my family—very strong female figures who do not have much imagination in an intellectual sense, but they’re very capable of dealing with life” (qtd. in *Understanding* 46). In this sense, Clara’s establishing of a relation with Revere is admirable, because it is motivated by her will for survival to guarantee her son’s survival (Johnson *Understanding* 46). The fact that Swan commits suicide after killing Revere may be interpreted, from this perspective, as a resentment over Clara’s and Swan’s dependence on him.

Before her motherhood experience is legitimized through marriage, Clara is condemned to suffer the scorn and despise of society. She lives by herself, isolated in a solitary house that Revere buys for her. Her closest friends cannot visit her since their families forbid them to do so; and Revere forbids Clara to visit them too. Her only company is Revere and Revere’s cousin Judd. Her solitude is increased by the fact that she has left her job, something which is not uncommon: White and Woollett explain that women tend to leave their employment outside the house, at least temporarily, during their first pregnancy. This implies that they lose the social contacts that a job brings and may feel isolated if they have few alternative social networks (15), as in Clara’s case.

Isolation from peer-networks has been named by Rich (22) and Hays (202) as one of the negative consequences of being exclusively mothers and housewives, but Clara actually enjoys her new independence: she has been able to settle and find some stability. As Johnson realizes, in this period, Clara enters a phase of self-created transcendence of her own motherhood and luxuriant isolation, associated with the garden at the back of the house (*Understanding* 46).

This means that in her isolation, Clara is able to connect with her experience as a mother without much interference from the institution of motherhood; and this is symbolized by the garden, which provides her with a natural framework parallel to her understanding of the role of mother at the time, based on the natural rhythms of the body. Besides, Clara realizes that she can possess and enjoy the beauty of the garden. She has always been obsessed with possessing things, and the garden somehow fulfills this desire by providing her with a sense of belonging. This is not a well-kept garden but has weeds and wild flowers, which suggests the social unconventionality of this phase, the freedom that Clara enjoys, and the natural relationship she has with her baby, barely mediated by society's intervention.

Clara, a single mother with a prominent lover, only rarely goes to town, because "people would stare angrily at her — she figured it would take them a while to get used to her and Revere, so she would give them that time" (*Garden* 205). Her reaction to this rejection is a rather serene one: she is of course aware of the prejudices of the community against her, but she is not bothered about the gossip. However, when those preconceptions are actually harmful for her or for Swan, she forcefully defends herself: upon one occasion, the baby gets sick and when she goes to the drugstore to buy some medicine, the owner refuses to help her. Upon her insistence, he finally gives her some pills, but refuses to charge anything for them. Clara is not daunted by this and yells: "My money's good enough for you!" (*Garden* 224).

The townspeople feel entitled to harass Clara because

historically, to bear a child out of wedlock has been to violate the property laws that say a woman and her child must legally belong to some man, and that, if they do not, they are at best marginal people, vulnerable to every kind of sanction. (Rich 260)

And so, while Clara gets in her car to return home, some children verbally harass her and she counterattacks by striking them.

This period is interrupted by Lowry's unexpected return: he visits her unannounced. This will be the last time they see each other, but the encounter will have a great impact both upon Clara, and even most

crucially, upon Swan. Permanently breaking the bond with Lowry is not easy for Clara because she still loves him, and she experiences some contradictory emotions, feeling that their son stands between them: “without [Swan] she would throw some things together and the two of them would run out to his car and drive off, and that would be that” (*Garden* 254). So ironically, the child comes to represent the bond between them and the element that makes them part at the same time.

Daly offers another relevant alternative interpretation for this episode. According to her, Clara does not understand that marrying Lowry is an alternative for her which would have enabled her to transcend destructive cultural forces that she has chosen by marrying Revere. She also rejects Lowry because she wants her child to inherit the material wealth that Revere offers. Although she rejects the more expansive and spiritual consciousness that making love with Lowry implies Clara also makes her choice based on the fact that she had experienced Lowry’s previous abandonment is a vulnerability too dangerous to allow. Thus, Clara plots to survive at the expense of her potentially more expensive imagination (32). Therefore, by choosing Revere over Lowry, Clara is choosing to legitimize her situation in order to gain access to a better social position and to the status of institutional mother. Significantly, in order to do so, she chooses the non-biological father instead of the biological one.

As his name indicates, Revere is literally Clara’s dream come true (*Cologne-Brookes Dark Eyes* 34). After Clara marries Revere, her social status gradually improves:

She went into town as much as she wanted now, no one bothered her — most of the men were gone [to war] and quite a few of the families, following their men down out of the mountains to work in the defense factories, disappearing. [...] The world had suddenly open up the horizons falling back far beyond the ridge of mountains that had seemed at one time to be the limit of their world. And so nobody cared about Clara now: after four years, she was almost as good as Revere’s wife, and so they did not bother her. (*Garden* 236-237)

Apart from her new marital status, the improvement of her position is facilitated by the changing political and social circumstances: many men were gone to fight in the Second World War, and families had moved as a consequence. The opening of the borders to which the quote alludes is not only a mere question of physical mobility; it also refers to the borders of the mind: compared to the horrors of a bloody war fought in a far-away country, the moral scandals of a small village do not have much importance. This does not mean that the question is forgotten: Swan is harassed by his stepbrothers, and some members of the Revere family despise and ignore Clara. In the following years, these relations improve due to Clara's constant efforts to become included.

Clara works relentlessly to build and maintain a good relationship with her husband's wealthy relatives by presenting her best image to them, organizing parties, visiting them, etc. Once more, this arises the question of upward social mobility in the novel. Since she was a child, Clara had been ashamed of her poor education, her accent, and her upbringing as a "white trash" girl. She spends her life making efforts to leave this behind.

### **3.3 SELF-DEPRIVATION: MRS. PEDERSEN AND HELENE**

In *Wonderland*, the experience of motherhood of Mrs. Pedersen and Helene is clearly distorted due to social and patriarchal pressures which are incarnated in the oppressive and controlling natures of two male characters, namely, their husbands Dr. Pedersen and Jesse.

As a consequence of her husband's repression, from which she unsuccessfully tries to escape, Mrs. Pedersen runs the risk of losing her identity by utterly reducing herself to her role as a mother/wife. Her exclusive dedication to this role causes an affective distortion which ultimately leads her to experience a complete lack of self-love. This situation has consequences over her daughter Hilda and the girl's relation to her body, namely, her womb.

Helene is also representative of the forceful submission to motherhood as institution: she did not want to have children but in the end, feeling coerced by her husband and society, she agrees. The effects of Helene's troubled relationship with her experience as a mother are felt on her daughter Shelley, with whom she has a distant relationship.

This proves the influence of vertical identity on both Hilda and Shelley, in these cases with negative effects for the girls.

As Friedman points out, in *Wonderland*, the question of motherhood takes a highly metaphorical function: all the female characters, being pregnant or not, have something to say about their wombs. Their attitude to their reproductive organs reflects their relationship to the external world (Joyce 192-193). Thus, the womb is a powerful symbol with complex undertones in the novel. Hilda's case is especially significant, and combined with Helene's and Shelley's experiences, it offers a comprehensive picture of the treatment of this topic in the novel.

Mrs. Pedersen incarnates the distortions brought about by a radical commitment to the second type of motherhood coined by Rich: the institution of motherhood. As a result, her identity is distorted to the extent that there is a suggestion of a total dissolution of the self. In other words, Mrs. Pedersen has been reduced to her role as a mother by her controlling husband, who has at the same time destroyed her self-love by inflicting on her psychological violence, which limits her capacity of movement and prevents her from making her own choices, and even from exerting authority or inspiring respect in her biological children.

Psychological maltreatment is any behavior that is harmful or intends to be harmful to the well-being of a person. Andersen, Boulette and Schwartz (qtd. in Tolman et al. 323) depict the concept of psychological maltreatment as a form of mind control, where psychological coercion or regulation over individual freedom appears, indicating at the same time a maladaptive relationship. Among these coercive features, we find verbal or physical dominance early in the courtship or marriage, isolation or imprisonment to some degree, infusion of fear, promotion of powerlessness and helplessness, pathological expressions of jealousy, required secrecy and enforced loyalty and self-denunciation. Barnett et al. add to this list verbal denigration, rejection, and exposing other family members to witness violence (276). Some evidence shows that psychological maltreatment usually precedes physical aggressions and/or sexual violence (Basile and Black 114).

The main forms of psychological maltreatment are the creation of fear, isolation, monopolization, economic abuse, degradation, psychological destabilization, emotional or interpersonal withdrawal, contingent expressions of love and rigid sex role expectations or trivial requests (Tolman et al. 326-328). There may be an overlap among them: for instance, a verbal put-down in front of others is degrading, but it might also lead to social isolation because the victim may want to avoid social situations in which such abuse may occur.

Fear may be induced in different ways. The most obvious one involves physical threats, such as threatening to kill the victim, brandishing weapons, or confining the victim for hours under the threat of harm. The threats may also be more implicit: a frightening look or stance, or an agitated mood that puts in the victim fear of physical harm. There are also non-physical threats, such as taking away the children, placing the victim in a mental institution, denying financial support to gain her/his compliance, leaving her/him, having an affair, revealing secrets, humiliating her/him on public, etc. These psychological threats reinforce obedience and promote anxiety, since often other previous threats have been carried out. Mrs. Pedersen asserts that her husband is constantly threatening her; and she is clearly afraid of him.

Isolation can take many forms. Abusers may control the gas of the victims' cars or the miles they drive to restrain their activities, or forbid them to have friends over at home. Alternatively, isolation can acquire more subtle forms, like refusing to go to social gatherings, putting down or making fun of the victims' friends or family, or being rude or threatening when people come over, thus making victims feel uncomfortable to maintain such relations. Isolation may also involve controlling the flow of information by requiring that secrets be kept within the family, or limiting information coming into the family. All these tactics imply that the victim's contact with the outside world is limited. Frequently, the isolation increases over time, and the victim's resources and sense of competence in the outside world decreases.

Mrs. Pedersen is completely isolated. Not only does she often stay at home, but her inability to drive limits her movements: "she had never learned, and Dr. Pedersen believed now that it was too late for her to learn; anyway, she told Jesse apologetically, she was a nervous person



so perhaps it was better that she had never gotten a driver's license" (*Wonderland* 160-161). This comment proves that, indeed, her sense of competence in the outside world is greatly reduced.

Mrs. Pedersen is also socially secluded: she asserts that she does not have anyone to talk to. She is isolated from her Family System of Origin: the fact that she maintains a secret correspondence with her father suggests that she cannot freely meet him. The only person that mitigates her isolation is Jesse, since her biological family does not pay much attention to her: Dr. Pedersen is frequently away from the house, working; and her other children mostly ignore her. On the contrary, Jesse keeps her company, listens to her, and takes her on outings in his car (which are kept secret from Dr. Pedersen, who would not have approved of them).

By forcing this isolation upon her, Dr. Pedersen purposely aims at making Mrs. Pedersen depend on him for even the most trivial matters, and this increases her sense of insecurity, defenselessness and ineptitude in the outside world. These mechanisms reduce her capacity for rebellion by mitigating her resources and by virtually suppressing her access to an accomplice to assist her: Jesse, Mrs. Pedersen's only means of getting effective help, is expelled from the family after trying to assist her in running away. Apart from these blatant controlling tools, Dr. Pedersen also employs some of the aforementioned subtler methods of dominance, like criticizing his wife's family, and forcing her to keep secrets, such as his addiction to morphine.

Monopolization refers to behaviors that make abusers the psychological center of the victims' perceptions. For instance, abusers may be intrusive by interrupting the victims' activities by constantly telephoning them, depriving them of their time or possessions; or demanding involvement in the abusers' activities only, as well as accounts for how victims use their time. Coupled with isolation, extreme monopolization creates a totalistic state similar to that experienced by prisoners of war being brainwashed by their captors. Dr. Pedersen demands absolute dedication from Mrs. Pedersen at all times: he expects her life to revolve exclusively about him, even in its most trivial details, often accompanying his orders with a courteous and paternalistic attitude.

Next, economic abuse takes multiple forms. Victims may be excluded from important financial decisions that affect them; be denied access to cash, checking accounts or credit cards; or have their autonomy limited because abusers demand to know how each dollar is spent. Abusers may also misuse or misappropriate family funds, creating extreme financial hardship. Dr. Pedersen makes all the economic decisions of the household, despite the fact that Mrs. Pedersen comes from a wealthy family and could have been economically independent. She complains to Jesse that her husband does not let her buy anything without his approval.

Degradation involves making someone feel less competent, less adequate, or even less human. The most common form of degradation is verbal abuse, such as insults, name-calling, put-downs or criticism of someone's abilities. Extreme degradation includes, for instance, the obligation to perform sexual acts in front of other people. Dr. Pedersen degrades his wife by criticizing and humiliating her: he is said to enjoy making her cry. For instance, he once took all her clothes away, forcing her to stay naked in the bedroom for three days. He also degrades her by forcing her to read, against her will, books illustrated with explicitly violent images. Besides, when they got married, he examined her to make sure that she was a virgin, a clearly sexually humiliating act.

Psychological destabilization comprises acts that leave victims unsure of the validity of their own perceptions. This may be attained by lying, manipulating or employing other strategies to confuse victims. Abusers may also blame victims for their abusive behavior or angry moods, lie about their whereabouts and accuse victims of overreacting when they confront them about it, hide possessions and deny knowledge of his whereabouts, etc.

After being subject to her husband's maltreatment, Mrs. Pedersen becomes an extremely unconfident person, especially when facing new situations. At home, she is extremely efficient, as seen when she methodically prepares Jesse's luggage to go to college. However, when she is under pressure and away from her house (which functions both as a shelter and a prison, similarly to Cressida's relation to her home in *Carthage*), Mrs. Pedersen becomes clumsy and forgetful. This is reflected on the difficulties she finds when trying to leave her husband:

she forgets her clothes and shoes at home and then checks in a hotel her husband knows of, she is terrified of going into the street and facing people, etc. She has been infantilized and overprotected for so many years that she is even unsure about how to check in at the hotel, because someone else always did it for her.

Emotional or interpersonal withdrawal is a passive form of psychological maltreatment. In this case, positive behaviors that are expected in a relationship are withheld. For instance, leaving the relationship for periods of time with no explanation, not speaking to the victims, ignoring them, showing insensitivity toward the victims' emotional and sexual needs, or not living up to the commitments of the relationship. Certainly, a short time after their marriage, Dr. Pedersen refused to speak to his wife for a whole month, and he never gave her any explanation, which is a clear instance of emotional withdrawal.

Rigid sex role expectations or trivial requests involve expecting the victim to comply with trivial exigences related to rigid sex roles, such as performing household chores flawlessly or interrupting the victim to demand something to be done. All this makes victims feel like an incompetent child. Other demands are directly related to sex, like having sex when the victim does not want to, or performing sexual acts that the victim dislikes. These rigid expectations cause Mrs. Pedersen to retreat into her role of mother/wife. Her husband expects from her a flawless execution of household tasks and child rearing; but despite her efforts to please him, he is never completely satisfied with her performance, and blames her for not having the children he would have liked:

My wife, Mrs. Pedersen, is a most generous woman, religious and good, an excellent wife and mother, though rather spoiled by her father... but she has failed to give me the child I had foreseen for myself. (*Wonderland* 87)

Dr. Pedersen considers that giving birth to this perfect child was Mrs. Pedersen's main responsibility as a wife. He specifically uses the expression "give me the child," which proves his feeling of possessiveness over his family and his vision of his wife as a mere tool.

In time, Jesse will also consider his wife Helene an instrument to reach his goals of having a family.

Dr. Pedersen's motives for treating his wife in such a denigrating manner seem to be related not only to a sexist education that preached the submission of women to men, but also to his domineering and sadistic impulses. Dr. Pedersen's sadism is reflected in his scrapbook entitled "The Book of Fates." The book contains two sections: the first part comprises family photographs and clippings from newspapers regarding the family achievements; and the second part, called "Impersonal Fates," contains news clippings and images of strangers involved in violent accidents and grisly crimes. Most of them are related to surprising coincidences, hence the title "fates." It is enlightening, at this point, to examine how sadism is defined and exerted, for it shall allow us to introduce later on one of the main themes of *Wonderland*: homeostasis.

As Baumeister explains, sadism is a complex phenomenon, which implies receiving direct pleasure from hurting others. Sadistic enjoyment is gradually developed over a period of time involving multiple experiences of hurting others. In these cases, sadistic pleasure may be habit-forming.

Sadism may be thus described as an addiction; and as such, theories about addiction can explain how it works. In the 1970s, Richard L. Solomon and John D. Corbit proposed the opponent process theory. They argued that the body has a natural state of equilibrium called homeostasis, as well as some mechanisms to restore homeostasis if it is disturbed. For instance, during a race the heart beats faster, and after the race, it slows down again. Therefore, the body operates on the basis of opponent processes: one that moves away from equilibrium (speeding up) and one that has the opposite effect (slowing back down.) They are, respectively, the A phase or departure phase; and the B phase or restorative process.

When taking drugs or alcohol, the A phase is pleasant (e.g., getting drunk), while the B phase is unpleasant (e.g., having a hangover). If we apply this to sadism, we see that the initial reaction to hurting another person is distressing, but the body does not remain in that state: it returns back to its normal equilibrium. Since the initial reaction is

unpleasant, the opponent reaction must be pleasant and positive. The first time, the bad feelings will be quite salient, while the feelings of the B phase will be muted. If the person continues to inflict harm, the balance between good and bad may shift, according to the opponent process pattern: the disgust becomes weaker while the pleasure becomes greater. The enjoyment will also start sooner, in keeping with the gradual rise in efficiency that the opponent process has. And so, cruel acts may start to provide pleasure. We need to notice that in this case, the pleasure is in the B process, and therefore, it does not have the same pattern as the addiction to alcohol, for instance. In cases of murder, the thrill is in the backwash. In other words, overtime, the unpleasant part becomes weaker; and one may gradually start to crave for the experience.

In sum, there is an ironic turn when discussing sadism. Obviously, empathy and guilt work in general as a deterrent to cruelty; but the most extreme cruelty makes use of empathy, since to be absolutely cruel, it is necessary to know what the victim feels in order to increase the suffering. More precisely, we might say that it uses empathy without sympathy (Baumeister 21, 205-206, 221, 233-236, 245, 247-248, 406).

Indeed, Dr. Pedersen is a highly egoistic man, who nonetheless has sufficient empathy to know what his wife enjoys, and he uses this perception to deprive her of the activities she likes; for instance, going on trips. Hence, the basic explanation for sadism lies in the disturbance, and the subsequent calm, of the body's natural balance or homeostasis, a concept significantly introduced by the character of Dr. Pedersen, who preaches this phenomenon that is mostly absent from his life, as we shall see.

As a consequence of Dr. Pedersen's violence over her, Mrs. Pedersen self-confidence is destroyed. In order to compensate for her low self-esteem, she finds comfort in taking care of others, and so she devotes her whole life to her role as mother/wife. But her experience of motherhood is distorted precisely because it depends on the erasure of her true self and the obliteration of her self-love, which eventually causes the reduction of her identity to that of a mother. And, as we shall explain in the next chapter, Ferenczi argues that in order to love someone, a person first needs to possess self-love (qtd. in Abraham and

Torok 112). The distortion caused by Mrs. Pedersen's lack of self-love and her self-destruction finds evident manifestation in her excessive feeding of her family, by which she exaggerates the motherly nurturing function as an expression of her excessive motherly love. This is a distorted love, because it functions as an overcompensation for her lack of self-love and the suppression of her own identity.

Mrs. Pedersen's own excessive eating (along with her secret alcoholism) is also an attempt to find consolation for her lack of fulfilment, aggravated by her children's constant rejection of her excessive love; but these mechanisms represent simply a temporary outlet or relief for her sense of entrapment and anxiety, and in the end bring no solution but only deteriorate her health and add to her sense of lack of control over her life. Summarizing, this exclusive commitment to being a mother almost annihilates all the other dimensions of her self in a clearly unhealthy way, to the extent that Mrs. Pedersen feels that she has destroyed her individual identity.

Mrs. Pedersen feels so utterly subjugated to her husband that she senses that she has lost herself. She is not the only character to experience this in the corpus: both Cressida Mayfield and Marianne Mulvaney have the same perceptions after suffering violent acts. Mrs. Pedersen feels that not only has her sense of self been tampered with, but she also feels deprived of her very human condition:

for years I've known I would have to leave him. It's a question of survival. My sanity. [...] I am a human being of my own, [j] I am Mary Shirer.... I am still Mary Shirer. [...] I want to go back to being her, that girl. [j] I want to be myself again... I don't know how this happened, this fat, the time that went by... (*Wonderland* 175)

Mrs. Pedersen notices the need to leave her husband as a first step to regain her sense of individuality. However, similarly to Marianne's yearning for her lost family and home (which shall be explained in "Fathers"), Mrs. Pedersen wishes to go back in time to being the single girl Mary Shirer, trying to ignore the transformations that her husband's violence has caused in her, both psychologically and physically. This is probably an attempt to come back to her true self before it was

manipulated by her husband and reduced to the role of a married mother. Realizing that she cannot move forward if she is looking at the past, she makes sensible decisions for the future (giving up drinking, abandoning her husband and living alone with her own money), but her plan is not successful because Dr. Pedersen finds it out.

Mrs. Pedersen explains that, as a younger woman besotted with her husband, she wanted to be loved and owned by him. This revelation proves the influence of patriarchal myths that argue that love is closely related to possession and domination; an idea that often leads to the appearance of violence. As a young girl, Mary Shirer learnt that loving a man would bring happiness to her; and that if such love required sacrifices from her, she should willingly and submissively accept them; as she did when becoming Mary Pedersen.

Part of the conflictive relation of Mrs. Pedersen with her female condition is assimilated by her daughter Hilda. Thirteen-year-old Hilda Pedersen has to endure an extremely constricted and stifling family situation: she is confined to a house in which privacy is almost nonexistent, and to her extraordinary gift for mathematics, which her father harshly promotes and exploits to the extent of forcing her to participate in public demonstrations of her abilities that she greatly dislikes. Consequently, Hilda, being both physically and spiritually restrained, lets herself grow apathetic and rarely wishes to leave the house. Hilda, like her brother Frederich, does not attend school, and neither of them appears to have any friends.

Hilda is a mostly insecure girl who seems to want affection, as noticed when Jesse is adopted into the family: Hilda is eager to create a bond with him, but in the end, she is unable to do so, possibly due to her shyness and social awkwardness. Hilda is not totally devoid of love, though: her mother is completely dedicated to her, but the girl despises her solicitous care, possibly, because adolescence is a time of searching for independence from the family and she would prefer to relate to her peers instead of her relatives; or because she considers her mother's love suffocating; or either because she sees herself reflected in her mother and this anguishes her: both live a confined life, and are subjected to Dr. Pedersen.





about placing glass on his food to kill him. Significantly, Hilda's fantasy is related to one of the most crucial roles of the experience of motherhood: being a natural provider of food. In this case, the nurturing function is exaggerated and distorted to an almost grotesque level: Hilda is turning the basic means of human survival, that is, the ingestion of food, into a lethal weapon. Curiously, in *Expensive*, food will also be used as a means of providing death, in this case through overconsumption: it is the method that the protagonist chooses to kill himself.

Hilda imagines harming her father with one of the symbols of his absorbing ego, that is, his overindulgence in food, which represents his need for dominance. This choice would have been a suitable and ironic punishment on Hilda's part. In fact, Hilda visualizes Dr. Pedersen as a cannibalistic father wishing to control and own his children to the extent of devouring them: "*You want to stuff me inside your mouth, I know you! [...] You want to press me into a ball and pop me into your mouth, back where I came from! You want to eat us all up!*" (*Wonderland* 149, emphasis in the original). This father-daughter devouring pattern is repeated in Jesse's relationship with his daughter Shelley. As we shall explain, this is linked to the fact that both girls feel that they have been given birth by their fathers instead of their mothers.

Although Hilda's technique of recoiling into her womb allows her to deal with the enormous pressures she encounters within her family, it is also a dangerous strategy, because it is based on the contemplation of motherhood as the only essence of her self. This problematic reduction of a woman's identity is criticized by Rich; and frequently portrayed in *Wonderland*, as seen in the figure of Mrs. Pedersen, whose approach to motherhood is somehow assimilated by her daughter Hilda. Similarly, the girl seems to have inherited her mother's weak sense of self.

Therefore, Hilda's distortion appears to be influenced by her vertical identity, that is, by the attitude that Mrs. Pedersen has toward motherhood, which she absorbs. Mrs. Pedersen suffers the effect of her husband's domination and his psychological violence over her: he has seriously damaged her ego and forced her into the role of a submissive mother, and alternatively, of a compliant child, for he constantly

infantilizes her, depriving her of authority over their children. As a result, Mrs. Pedersen accepts the dedication to the institution of motherhood as her only sign of identity, which in turn distorts her experience of motherhood as well as any other possible identities she may have.

Hilda also appears to be in risk of losing her sense of self by taking her reliance in her reproductive power to extreme levels. It lets her not only flee from her parents, but also transcend family ties and even get rid of the notions of male or female, because in her secret self she is “not [Dr. Pedersen’s] daughter at all or even a female” (*Wonderland* 137). But Hilda’s initially liberating experience seems to reach such an extent that she gets rid not only of constricting labels but also runs the risk of becoming isolated from her own self by means of such radical abstractions.

Ironically, Hilda’s womb also represents her metaphorical hunger for a life free of boundaries: “the tiny sac inside her, that elastic, magical emptiness that could never be filled, no matter how much she ate. It was the size of a universe” (*Wonderland* 141). It appears that Hilda’s true life is not in the external world, but inside of her own body. This quotation also suggests that her necessities (security, affection, belonging) shall never be satisfied. Hilda’s spiritual hunger also recalls her enormous physical hunger, a common metaphor in Oates.

In contrast with Hilda’s interpretation of her womb as a source of identity, Helene sees her body as alien from her: she refers to it as “crystalline” and “frightened” (*Wonderland* 282), adjectives which convey her vision of her body as cold, fragile, and foreign. Accordingly, she dislikes having intimate relationships with her husband. Helene’s body is not a place of empowerment, or pseudo-empowerment, as in Hilda’s case. On the contrary, Helene’s lack of connection with her body is indicative of her lack of self-love.

Helene is a character who suffers the imposition to become a mother more visibly than other female characters in the corpus: “All her life she had felt the wild rushes of expectation and fear. *To be a woman. A wife.* You needed a man to complete you; that was obvious. In order to be a woman, a wife” (*Wonderland* 284, emphasis in the original). The identification between being a woman and being a wife is absolute

here: for her, becoming a real woman is impossible without the intervention of a man.

Helene's case illustrates the pull among obligations, expectations and pressures of the mother's role. In *them*, Maureen is also extremely aware of what is expected from her as a female:

She would get married and have a baby, dress herself in the same puffy big blouses her mother wore, the same kind, a woman like her mother; she could not escape. She did not want to get married but there was no other way.  
(*them* 173)

Like Maureen, Helene knows that society expects that, as a wife, she should have children, but she does not wish to assume this responsibility: "she did not want a baby, she did not want a husband, she did not want to be completed..." (*Wonderland* 294). Indeed, during a gynecological revision, she tells the clinic staff that "Mrs. Vogel" is not her name. She obviously wants to disengage herself from the pressures and expectations of being Mrs. Vogel, that is, a married woman who is expected to bear children.

As Bender explains, Helene, as a woman, lives in a world of enemies: her unborn children, her husband and a world of gapers and directors, who turn her into a self-hating creature. In an inversion of Lewis Carroll's metaphors, she fights the looking glass (61). In fact, Helene hates looking at herself in mirrors: she particularly loathes the moment just before the mirror self is acknowledged, which points to the distress that she experiences toward herself. The novel explains that she has no use for mirrors, because she has always been "posing, moving, speaking in front of other people who watched her closely [j] [who] were always present, watching and assessing" (*Wonderland* 431). This sensation stands for the influence of other people's (presumably, men's) gaze and judgement upon her. The gaze of others, then, causes Helene's distaste for looking at herself in mirrors: since she feels she is not the one to define herself, the action of recognizing her mirror-image is somehow useless and disturbing, and it points to her alienation rather than to her self-creation. Similarly, her daughter Shelley will grow to be conditioned by male's gaze upon her.

Helene is not expected to develop an independent, active role: her father and her husband are said to talk “at” her, and never to listen (*Wonderland* 282): they do not talk *with* her because they do not expect a real interaction. She fits the view that Irigaray has of some mothers who have their identity imposed on them according to models that remain foreign to them (131): it is Helene’s father, her husband, and her gynecologist the ones who define her by means of their vision of her as Mrs. Jesse Vogel. Significantly, Helene does not have a mother on whom she can rely, or take as a role model in a positive or even negative sense: the relationship with her late mother is presented as having been stiff and distant.

Helene, then, marries Jesse in an attempt to fulfill the obligations of her gender. She does not appear to be too happy about her marriage in the subsequent years: the bond between her and Jesse is rigid, unimaginative and impersonal; possibly not totally devoid of affection but certainly lacking in passion, communication and spontaneity. All this can be partially understood as a consequence of her lack of self-love as manifested in her rejection of her own body due to the interference of the patriarchal ideology.

This circumstance of being externally defined immediately brings to mind Elena Howe from *Do with Me*. In fact, the closeness of their first names, Helene and Elena, seems to reflect their common traits. Elena is manipulated by all the people around her, including her parents and husband, who organize and control her life to the minimal detail, not giving her the chance to speak her mind: she will have to fight in order to attain freedom. While on her own, Elena feels the “unpredictable rhythms” of her body, but in the presence of her husband “she lost that sensation entirely; she had to think of him, reply to him, she had to present herself constantly for him] like a person in a room walled with mirrors, unable to escape the image of himself” (*Do with Me* 508). In this case, the mirror does not even reflect Elena: her husband’s presence is so overwhelming and imposing that he becomes the only figure in the mirror; that is, he is the one to displace her, preventing her from self-definition.

But there is an essential difference between Helene and Elena: Helene barely seems to have an existence differentiated from her role

of mother/wife, that is, outside the definitions of others; whereas Elena does exist apart from her husband, and this gives her enough energy to pursue and achieve a life of her own, an identity beyond “Mrs. Marvin Howe.”

For Helene, her potential to be a mother is not a source of power but an unbearable burden. Utterly defined by the others’ gaze and social expectations, which makes the symbolical moment of self-recognition and self-observation on the mirror useless and vain, she lacks the self-esteem that should have animated a healthy relationship with her body, and as a consequence her self-hatred finds expression in the repugnance she feels for it: Helene’s body has become her enemy due to the exploitation that patriarchy makes of it by convincing her of the absolute necessity of bearing children to be fulfilled as a woman. Thus, Helene’s case evinces to what extent motherhood as institution has negative and distorting effects over motherhood as experience, since it implies a prolonged attempt to reduce female identity to the capacity to become mothers.

This ruins for her the experience of motherhood as a natural event, and makes the very thought of becoming pregnant repulsive to her: “It was impossible. She could not really be pregnant. Her body was too lean and somber, it had no glow to it, no resiliency” (*Wonderland* 283). She does not seem to trust her body to resist a pregnancy, and fantasizes about having an abortion. In the end, she goes on with her pregnancy, but she pleads to Jesse not to force her to have another baby. Significantly, she eventually does have one more daughter, and cries when she learns that she cannot have more children, which could confirm her utter though unwilling submission to the institution of motherhood.

In accordance with this denaturalized perspective on motherhood, Helene experiences the bodily changes during her pregnancies as an extremely unpleasant physical experience: “she had been sick again that morning, wretchedly sick, she was now in her seventh month of pregnancy and [she and Jesse] were both afraid she might lose the baby, after so many months of misery” (*Wonderland* 303). She is thus experiencing psychological distress, too: if she suffers an abortion, her previous pain would have been in vain.

In *Garden*, Clara's experience is described as "long, groggy months of pregnancy [which] kept her heavy and warm, slow, a little dizzy with the awareness of what her body was going to accomplish" (*Garden* 204-205). In general, Helene has a much more complicated pregnancy than Clara, despite the fact that the latter spends much of her time alone and does not have the social approval that Helene enjoys. Moreover, while pregnant, Helene is infantilized, among other people, by her own father: "I think it's that baby you're going to have... you're rehearsing innocence for it, the innocence of a young mother" (*Wonderland* 358). Helene greatly resents this treatment and tries to fight these misconceptions. Of course, it is not only men who condescend on pregnant women: in the same scene from *Wonderland*, Mrs. Perrault, the wife of Jesse's boss speaks to Helene as if she were "talking to children" (*Wonderland* 358). Mrs. Perrault is perhaps simply following the general patriarchal trend that she probably had to experience during her own pregnancy and which she has assimilated.

Helene is worried about the changes that pregnancy brings, and resents Jesse for pressuring her to have a baby:

why couldn't he understand how a bad idea it was to have a baby now? Why couldn't he understand her fear of the pain, the bitter, inevitable ripeness her body had to suffer? And then she would be a mother for life. *For life*. She did not want to be a mother. She was frightened. She did not want to enter that new state, to be delivered over into that new condition for a lifetime... (*Wonderland* 282, emphasis in the original)

She does not tell Jesse any of this, proving once more that their marriage lacks fluid communication. Her unwanted pregnancy makes her feel alienated from her own body, and she feels that she is losing control over her life.

The effects of the traditional control of women's reproductive capabilities by men are clearly suggested during a gynecological examination that Helene undergoes (to reinforce the sense of submission, it is interesting to notice that it was her father the one to

settle the appointment, and not Helene herself) in which she feels utterly subdued, and even violated:

How could everything in her be so exposed now? The most secret veins of her body were open to the air of this impersonal room. [...] The clamp was cold and hard inside her, making a rim, a bracelet inside her, exposing her. Her body began to contract. She could not stop it. Her womb wanted to shrink back, hide itself. The secret parts of her body were drawing together in terror. Her knees came together hard—

“No, please, Mrs. Vogel,” a man said in surprise.

He gripped her knees and spread them apart again.

(*Wonderland* 294-295)

In the end, Helene hurts herself with the clamp and starts to bleed. The episode plainly conveys the impotence caused by the imbalance of power between her and the doctor: she feels at his mercy, placed in a submissive position that aggravates the complicated relationship that she already has with her body. In fact, the description of the doctor forcefully spreading her knees is reminiscent of a sexual assault.

Upon abruptly exiting the gynecological examination, she reflects:

*I am Helene Cady! What has happened to me? I was supposed to grow up into a certain person, but where is that person? I've waited for years and nothing has happened, marriage hasn't made any difference... and now my life is over, I can't tell myself it will happen in the future, I am through waiting for my life to happen... I am everything now, at this moment, that I will ever be. It's over.* (*Wonderland* 300, emphasis in the original)

Helene is shocked about her unwanted pregnancy, and this is an extremely stressful moment for her. There are several crucial revelations in this quotation. The first of them is that she refers to herself by the surname “Cady,” her maiden name, as if she felt that her true essence resides in her former self, and not in her new condition as a wife. At this respect, Helene’s reaction recalls that of Mrs. Pedersen

referring to herself by her maiden name “Mary Shirer” as the part of her that held her true self. It appears that Helene and Mrs. Pedersen feel that they have lost their true identity after marrying. Interestingly, they do not appear to realize that even as Cady and Shirer they are being defined by the name of the Father.

Helene is trapped by her circumstances and does not possess, or achieve, the potential to exert her own will. She had studied chemistry at Ann Arbor, but abandoned her professional career after obtaining her Master’s degree, dedicating all her time to motherhood. Helene fits into a set of generally passive female characters present in the beginning of Oates’s literary career. These women are passive for diverse reasons: the influence of their families and society, their own personalities, etc. In the corpus, the most noticeably passive female characters, apart from Helene, Mrs. Pedersen and Hilda, are Maureen and Nadine from *them*. This pattern of female helplessness in Oates’s fiction will gradually change, when her works start to focus more deeply in the female figures. The first female-protagonist that explicitly fights against this passivity is Elena from *Do with Me*.

Eventually, Helene gives birth to two daughters. Her childbirth is not described in the novel, but the consequences are plain. First, as Daly argues, giving birth gives Helene some sense of the (in the novel’s terms) “wisdom of the body” (60): this wisdom refers to the achievement of a certain peace with her body, which is however not total, because it is partly based on her resignation to the obligations of motherhood as institution. Second, Helene never develops a strong bond with her children. She efficiently takes care of them, but is detached and emotionally unresponsive. This may be interpreted as the effect of the total suppression of the experience of motherhood in favor of the institution of motherhood, which results in denaturalized relationships devoid of instinctive or affective natural connotations. As a consequence, Helene’s mothering attitude to her daughters is somewhat mechanical, and may even be interpreted as emotional neglect, which is a kind of violence also found in Nada from *Expensive*.

Emotional neglect is part of the broader concept of child neglect. Neglect is generally defined as an act of omission, committed by parents or caregivers, that results in harm to the children (Zuvarin qtd.



in Gershater-Molko 158). In other words, it refers to deficits in the provision of a child's basic needs, such as inadequate food in quantity or quality, insufficient clothes or not adapted to the weather conditions, insufficient hygiene, absence or delay of regular health care, lack of supervision for long periods of time, and educational negligence such as irregular attendance to class or unjustified absences. It is important to distinguish between situations where the parents are able to provide for these needs and situations of omission caused by lack of financial resources (Barnett et al. 110, Gracia and Musitu qtd. in Balsells Bailón 61).

Neglect can be subdivided into six main groups: physical neglect, child abandonment and expulsion, medical neglect, inadequate supervision, educational neglect and emotional neglect. The latter type is the one we find in *Wonderland*. It is broadly defined as an indifference toward the child's emotional needs: the child's need for emotional support, security, and encouragement is not provided for because the caretaker is emotionally unavailable, indifferent or rejects the child (Gershater-Molko 159-160, Barnett et al. 115).

In fact, Helene thinks of her children as Jesse's babies, not hers, because he was the one who actually wanted children. This stands in sharp contrast to Clara Walpole's conviction that her son is exclusively hers. Like Clara, Helene is an efficient mother with a composed attitude; but unlike her, Helene does not display interest or satisfaction in child-caring, or in her children: "In their own apartment she was rarely happy. Her smiles were thin and forced. Even when she fussed over Jeanne, when she dressed Jeanne or played with her, Helene's smile was strained and unconvincing" (*Wonderland* 354). Helene provides for every other thing that the children may need except emotional warmth: she is not affectionate toward them and does not encourage them or give them emotional security, something that Shelley greatly resents. Helene tries to perform her role with all the dignity she can gather, but the tension that the quotation mentions reveals that she has not found any satisfaction in tending to her children. When Jeanne and Shelley are teenagers, Helene's attitude grows calmer and perhaps more resigned: she seems somehow less anxious.

Helene's experience as a mother is further complicated by the fact that, as it often occurs, she has not received any emotional training or has not been emotionally prepared to become a mother (Welldon 22), and thus she must face the complications of her new state mostly by her own means.

Thus, as in the case of Hilda, Helene's womb stands for her isolation, but unlike the girl, she does not find any relief in this condition, but only anguish. In fact, after telling Jesse that she is pregnant, she thinks that everything has stopped, which can be considered as a metaphor for the entrapment she feels in her role as a mother.

The disturbed relationship of Helene to motherhood logically influences her relationship with her daughters, especially Shelley. Thus, not only Helene, but also her teenage daughter find severe complications when defining themselves as women and at the same time as mother/wife and daughter, respectively: this represents a conflict between their vertical identities (composed by the patriarchal prejudices inherited from their parents) and their horizontal identities (composed by their own self-definition as women). Helene and Shelley are unable to reconcile both identities and let other people or institutions define them: Helene lets patriarchy and her husband dictate her future; while Shelley flees from the oppressive control of her father only to submit to her lover, who totally redefines her identity. Bender highlights yet another similitude between them: Helene and Shelley cannot overcome their hideous vision of their own sexuality, because they are imprisoned in a misogynistic culture (60).

As in Helene's case, Shelley's tormented relationship with her female body is linked to her reproductive potential. Probably influenced by her mother's distorted experience of motherhood resulting in emotional neglect, Shelley lacks the emotional nourishment that Hilda enjoys in excess, as the former's emaciation in contrast with the latter's obesity suggests. In fact, Shelley often emphasizes her disconnection to her mother caused by the latter's frequent coldness and emotional unresponsiveness toward her, to the extent that she argues that she was not born from her mother, who had "nothing to do with it" (*Wonderland* 407). This notion is shared by Hilda, who thinks her father has "given

birth to her himself [j] sat in that dark inner office [j] and imagined her into being” (*Wonderland* 137).

We have already introduced this notion following Irigaray’s argument when discussing the umbilical cord by arguing that the phallic penis takes back the power to give birth from the mother. This argument is elaborated in the essay “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” (published in 1981), where Irigaray highlights that the relevance of the relationship between mother and children, and especially daughters, has been silenced and concealed behind the patriarchal emphasis on the father-children bond. Here she refers to the underrepresentation of maternal power as “the murder of the mother,” that is, the sacrifice of such relationship. Fathers, then, have appropriated the creative power of mothers. As a result,

by denying the mother her generative power and by wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of flesh a universe of language [*langue*<sup>22</sup>] and symbols which cannot take root in it except as in the form of that which makes a hole in the bellies of women and in the site of their identity. (Irigaray 41)

First of all, in the novel there is a recurrent attempt on the part of male characters to deny women’s creative capacities, both biological and intellectual: in the previous quotation from the novel, Hilda is convinced that her father can give birth to her by means of his imagination, that is, his intellectual prowess. Second, the fact that Shelley feels the same suggests the existence of misogynistic tendencies in the new generations of daughters passed from one generation to another by their vertical identities. Shelley’s rejection of her mother is also possibly based on her disappointment upon Helene’s lack of interest in her: in fact, when she runs away, Shelley is convinced that her mother knew of her plans and could have stopped her had she wanted to. This appears to be true, because Helene tells Jesse not to bother to look for their daughter. Alternatively, resorting to Irigaray’s

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<sup>22</sup> Defined as the corpus of language (French, Italian, English, etc) (Whitford 17).

ideas, Shelley's rebuff of her mother can also be influenced by a social tendency of the Law of the Father (fathers of families, of nations, doctors, lovers, etc.) to forbid the desire for the mother, to censor and repress it, to symbolically kill her (36). This is plainly seen in *Wonderland*, where the monologic consciousness of men threatens to erase women's place.

Men's envy for women's capability to reproduce has been called "womb envy" by the German psychoanalyst and physician Karen Horney. Horney interpreted male's efforts for achievement as overcompensation for their lack of ability to create by giving birth. From her perspective, men fear and attribute evil to women because they feel inadequate when comparing themselves to them, and that is why they see them as inferior. Horney explained that men still retained the feelings of inferiority that originated with the perception of the small size of their penises during childhood, when they initially noticed them. Therefore, they need to prove their masculinity throughout their lives, and do so by having sexual intercourse. Any failure in erection will be perceived as a lack of masculinity, making men constantly vulnerable to feelings of inferiority. Women have no similar problem and do not suffer from inferiority due to their sexual performance, because even if they are frigid, they can have intercourse and bear children. This resentment can lead men to try to diminish women. If they succeed, women are made to feel inferior. Therefore, female inferiority originates in male insecurities rather than, as Freud argued, in the women's perception of having inferior genitals (qtd. in Brannon 111-112). Moreover, as Irigaray argues, when the reproductive prowess is indeed attributed to maternal power, it becomes a defensive network projected by the man, and the belly is presented as threatening, imagined as a devouring mouth. There are no words to describe it, except "filthy, mutilating" words (41).

The loss of the bond with her mother has terrible consequences for Shelley: just as in the case of Helene and her own mother, Helene and Shelley are not capable of developing a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity, which according to Irigaray is an indispensable condition for women's emancipation from the authority of fathers and could contribute to shake the foundations of patriarchal order (50). Indeed,

Shelley runs away from home to escape her father, but ironically submits to the demands of another man, her lover Noel: this proves that she does not have the self-assuredness to question her own submission to male rule, which is something that she has neither learnt from her mother. They are not liberated together, as Irigaray recommends. Helene has not been able to explore, express or exert her own desires, and this is apparently transmitted to her daughter, who only learns how to obey others even when she is significantly trying to escape from the Father/her father. As Irigaray warns, a woman is in danger of losing her identity when her relationship with her mother is tinged by need and deprived of identity; and as a consequence, she becomes an object of desire for her father (52). This is exactly Shelley's condition: escaping from her father's incestuous perusal, she falls under the authority of Noel and the counterculture community.

Interestingly, Shelley loses and repudiates her reproductive capacity after running away from home and becoming severely malnourished. Firstly, this condition is caused by her troubled relationship with her father, which shall be analyzed in the chapter "Fathers:" she uses her malnourishment, sexual unattractiveness and her inability to conceive to repel her father's incestuous advances. Secondly, this may be an unconscious effect of the influence she has received from the anxious relationship that her mother has with motherhood and with her own body. As Wellton notices, it is frequent to find cases of anorexic women accompanied by menstrual disruptions, which are indicative of a series of unsolved problems regarding not only the woman's self-image but also her acceptance of her own sexuality and her biological capacity (15).

In conclusion, both Hilda and Shelley are the daughters of dominant fathers and submissive mothers who nonetheless present opposed features. Hilda is an obese girl somehow symbolically suggesting the excess of love that her mother gives to her, which she finds oppressing and thus rejects. On the contrary, Shelley is an extremely slim girl who does not receive much love from her mother, something that comes as a source of distress and sadness to her, at least at a young age. The relationship between mothers and daughters is in both cases seriously strained: despite Hilda's rejection of her, Mrs.

Pedersen keeps on loving her daughter in an excessively disproportionate manner due to her own lack of self-esteem; and Helene and Shelley apparently achieve a state of mutual unconcern. The two girls' relation to their female bodies is also opposed. Whereas Hilda is conscious of the potentiality of her womb, which provides her with the strength to endure her miserable life, Shelley renounces to her reproductive capacity in order to hide from her father.

In summary, in Clara we find a mother who has a fairly good adaptation to motherhood as experience, and who cleverly legitimizes her socially despised condition as a single mother by means of marriage. She is profiting from one of the demands of motherhood as institution (the one that reads that mothers are expected to be married) to provide for her son and herself. Outside the corpus of this study, there are other characters who represent this natural bond to motherhood: namely, Arlene from Oates's novel *Childwold*, who has several children from different men, unconcerned about the town's gossiping. For her, having children is a source of fulfillment and empowerment. As Friedman adds, pregnancy in this novel represents life force: the image of fertility as an all-encompassing force is also applied to Arlene's older daughter Nancy, as well as the fertility of nature, which supplants old forms with new, making way for the future (*Joyce* 192-193). On the contrary, both Mrs. Pedersen and Helene are trapped by the strict obligations of the institution of motherhood, and by the oppression of their husbands. As a result, they both have problematic relationships to their daughters and risk losing their individual identity.

Mrs. Pedersen, negatively influenced by the psychological violence of Dr. Pedersen and by her exclusive dedication to motherhood as institution, is devoid of her self-love, and paradoxically reduced to the position of a helpless child. She supplies her lack of self-love by devoting her entire life to her children and infusing them with an overwhelmingly excessive amount of love which they reject. As a consequence of her focus on motherhood, Mrs. Pedersen is in danger of losing all her identity.

Mrs. Pedersen's daughter Hilda is obese due to the excessive love that she receives from her mother, which she finds suffocating. She finds an outlet for this love and for her father's tyranny in her female

body, namely in her womb. However, this strategy might ironically derive into her recreation of her mother's loss of identity through her reduction to a merely reproductive role.

Helene's lack of self-love leads her to a self-hatred that is transmitted into the relationship with her daughter Shelley. Under the influence of Helene's rejection of her body, Shelley also rejects her reproductive capacity, partly to hide from the persecution of her father. Her emaciation is a reflection as well of the lack of motherly love she feels.

The analyzed female characters show mainly the tensions arising from the interference of institutionalized motherhood, which according to Rich pivots on the crucial notions of "maternal instinct," selflessness and relation to others (42). It disregards intelligence, self-realization, and the creation of self. Rich further elaborates upon the issue of maternal instinct:

the woman at home with children is not believed to be doing serious work; she is just supposed to be acting out of maternal instinct, doing chores a man would never take on, largely uncritical of the meaning of what she does. So child and mother are depreciated, because only grown men and women in the paid labor force are supposed to be "productive." The power-relations between mother and child are often simply a reflection of power-relations in patriarchal society: "You will do this because I know what is good for you" is difficult to distinguish from "You will do this because I can *make* you." (Rich 38, emphasis in the original)

Motherhood is indeed a challenging, serious and straining work, perhaps most noticeable in *them* and *Gravedigger's* where Loretta and Rebecca barely possess enough economic resources to bring their children up. Besides, *Expensive* and *Bird* present the complexities of the relationship between women's productive and reproductive capacities and their effect in the family. The next section, then, explores in detail the effects of the socioeconomic conditions on the experience

of motherhood, and the participation of mothers not only in the reproductive but also in the productive arenas.

### **3.4 WORKING MOTHERS. THE CONFLUENCE OF THE PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE UNIVERSES**

According to Rich, it is a fact that most of the labor in the world is done by women, who bear and care for children; raise, process, and market food; work in factories and sweatshops; clean the home and the office buildings; engage in barter; create and invent group survival; etc. But women's labor has traditionally been conditioned by their position in their families and mostly subordinated to such a position (xxii). As Cohen and Katzenstein observe, although feminism has elaborated diverse approaches to the question of the traditional family, in general it has been considered mostly detrimental to women's autonomy. The authors explain that from a conservative perspective, it is often considered that a man's responsibility to his family is best met in the market, that is, by his ability to earn a proper salary; while a woman's worth is measured by her dedication to her role as a wife and mother. Conservatives agree that a woman might find fulfillment outside the home, but only if two conditions are met. First, if she relies on her own resources rather than expecting others to assist her (e.g., the government). Second, if she does not allow her role as a mother and wife to be replaced by other interests. Most feminists consider the capacity to bear children as a gift to be used when desired, but not as the single defining trait of women's identity (36, 39, 50). Thus, two possible choices for women, namely, having children or acquiring a professional career, have traditionally been understood as opposing and incompatible.

The reductive effects of interpreting motherhood as the single defining trait of women's identity have been already analyzed as one of the essential features of motherhood as institution in Rich's terms, so now we shall focus on the limitations that such a conception imposes on women's involvement in the professional, productive universe of the labor market. An overlook on the evolution of this involvement shows how the demand that women's role as mothers and wives is to be



preeminent and never to be replaced by other interests has always prevailed.

### **3.4.1 Overview of Women's Involvement in the Labor Market in the Twentieth Century**

The history of women's work has not followed a steady course of increasing equality, but instead, it has been characterized by advances and recessions, which are shown in the corpus, as we shall next discuss.

Against the scenario of the Great Depression, the large Walpole family in *Garden* needs the wages of all its members in order to guarantee their subsistence, since they are migrant fruit-pickers with no fixed residence. Family life is developed on the road, and this makes the life of the working mothers extremely complicated: having no child-care facilities, Pearl is forced to place her baby-daughter at the end of a furrow while she works the fields, checking upon her whenever she gets close. Despite these difficulties, the Depression brings some sense of gender equality by forcing the whole family to work for a salary. But women's work is here motivated by an economic need, and as such it does not break the established order: it complies to the rule that motherhood is still the main role for these women. Their jobs, then, are totally subordinated to their role as mothers, since they are conceived as a necessary means for the subsistence of the family.

The fact that the whole family had to work for a salary did not bring complete parity, then: women and men still had separate duties in the household, and the housework and child-care tasks were still considered women's responsibility. This is clearly described in the novel: when the working day is over, women go on to work performing domestic chores, whereas men are portrayed relaxing, playing cards or going to bars.

When World War Two mobilized American men to the front, women started to occupy their positions in the labor market: by 1944, there were six and a half million women employed; and at the peak of war production in 1945, more than nineteen million women had entered the labor force. Women worked as riveters, cab drivers, welders, machine tool operators, etc. (Garraty 777). This trend is not so plainly seen in the corpus, but features in novels such as *Gravedigger's*, where Rebecca works at a tubing factory, *Niagara Tubing*; and *Blonde*, where

young Norma Jeane has a job at an assembly line in Radio Plane Aircraft in Burbank, California. As the aftermath of the war made evident, women's participation in the labor force was never meant to be a source of self-realization away from their domestic duties, but a sacrifice they were asked to perform for patriotic reasons. Again, their role as mothers and wives was not expected to be threatened. After the war, women were expected to return to their traditional duties, as seen in the trends of the next decade.

During the 1950s, then, there was a new wave of conservatism that placed great emphasis on the blessings of domestic life. The middle-class family was idealized, along with the suburban lifestyle (Hays 24). Women were thus urged to remain in the private sphere, or at most, to have traditionally "female" jobs. These "female" jobs were not expected to imply a violation of women's subordination to their supposed instinct for motherhood, since these jobs were mostly related to taking care of others by cleaning, cooking, looking after children or old people, teaching, arranging hair or applying make-up, etc.; or they were jobs in the most elementary positions of a company. In short, as Irigaray argues, the jobs that society offers to mothers imply that they go on being primarily mothers (50).

Therefore, these women's jobs are not considered transgressive jobs, and they do not imply a risk to the gender hierarchy; or to women's prioritization of motherhood over other roles or activities, which Cohen and Katzenstein have listed as one of the basic rules of working women. In *them*, Maureen works as a typist, and her mother Loretta has a series of jobs that also fit this description, such as a hairdresser's assistant. In any case, marrying and having children was still considered the essential goal for women. Influenced by this, Maureen quits her job when getting married, giving thus priority to being a mother/wife.

This trend toward domesticity was not a fortuitous occurrence: it was a programmed movement on the part of patriarchy to force women to give up their new more empowered positions. This trend was reinforced by popular culture: Hollywood movies of the 1950s were heavily focused on the trials and triumphs of family life (Garraty 795).

The 1960s were a time of social revolution, as clearly depicted in *Wonderland*; but still, in this novel, the main mother-characters do not

have a remunerated job but work at home. *Mulvaneys* depicts a farm in the 1970s, describing in an unidealistic manner the long hard-working hours it requires: fields need to be worked, gardens tended to, animals fed, the farm repaired, etc. The mother, Corinne, does not only work in the farm and take care of the house and children, but she also has a small business of antiques in one of the barns. Antiques are her passion, but they do not provide much income. After she starts her new life without her husband, she re-opens the shop in a more professional manner. This is a clear symbol of her totally regained autonomy.

But perhaps the novel that best illustrates the irregularities of women's advances in the labor arena is *Bird*. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the sexual revolution and women's movement had brought about many advantages for women, such as an increased (but still not total) sexual and emotional freedom. Many of them were nonetheless rejected by the new wave of political and religious conservatism which affected the United States in the 1980s and which was deeply hostile to the gains obtained by women during the 1970s. The ideology of the patriarchal family system gained strength, although many American families no longer fitted the traditional nuclear family pattern. Many women worked outside their homes, but the Doctrine of the Two Spheres was still functioning: women did not really enter a new and evolving society, but on the contrary, they were only integrated into the same structures that had made women's liberation movements necessary (Rich xviii). *Bird* shows some of these trends in the voice of Krista Diehl, who summarizes women's social situation:

In the 1980s, in Sparta, New York, the expectations of a young woman of Lucille's class —working-class/middle class/"respectable"/"good"— were not essentially different from the expectations of Lucille's mother in the late 1950s and early 1960s: you yearned to be engaged young, married young, start to have your babies young. You yearned to attract the love of an attractive man, possibly even a sexy man, certainly a man who *made a good living*, a man who *was faithful*. In the late 1960s, elsewhere in the country, or, at least, in the tabloid America fantasized, packaged and sold by the commercial

media, there had been *a sexual revolution: a hippie takeover*. But not in Sparta, and not in Herkimer County. Not in upstate New York in this glacier-raddled region in the southern foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. Here, despite a rising divorce rate, more “single-parent” homes (i.e., Negro mothers on welfare, much talked-of, disapproved-of), and other unmistakable incursions of the 1960s fallout, the America of the 1950s yet prevailed. (*Bird* 19-20, emphasis in the original)

As this panorama shows, whatever the degree of women’s participation in the labor market, household chores have hardly ever been considered a male task. As Brannon argues, inequity is closely related to the issue of household work. During the 1970s and 1960s, wives perceived that their husbands were not doing a fair share of these tasks, but they found rationalizations to allow themselves to think that this was actually “fair.” In the 1990s, women began to report increasing dissatisfaction with the unequal distribution of housework, and men tended to agree (Brannon 237). In *them*, the teenager Loretta challenges her brother’s domestic demands by stressing the autonomy that her job provides her with: “I live here, I come and go by myself, on my own, I work and make my own money. I don’t have to take any shit from you” (*them* 19). Loretta is making an important point in here: she claims an increased power on the basis of having a remunerated job, thus appropriating an argument traditionally used by patriarchy to despise the domestic chores traditionally assigned to women.

In conclusion, by taking a look at the relationship between women and work through the corpus, we may conclude with Cohen and Katzenstein

that a large measure of autonomy is possible for women, whether they are mothers or not, within the confines of the nuclear (not necessarily heterosexual or dual-parenting) family. The traditional family has to be rethought and refashioned. Feminist visions of the family are far more varied than the vision of the family that is idealized by the right (in which the woman meets her destiny by channeling all energy into motherhood). Feminism calls on people to

give up such cherished but mistaken notions as: all women have a vocation in motherhood; a child needs constant care from her or his biological mother; lesbians are morally inferior mothers; men aren't suited to be the nurturers of small children. A sharing of a child care and household tasks, and day care arrangements in which there is stable, affectionate attention, are two ways in which the family can be reshaped so as to make it possible to be both a woman and a person who is economically, politically, psychologically, and spiritually autonomous. (50)

The supposed need of children for their mothers hints at a central aspect of motherhood as institution: the portrayal of mothers as compliant to the needs of others. As Irigaray remarks, “[t]he maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need. Where desire is concerned, [j] the role of maternal-feminine power is often nullified in the satisfying of individual and collective needs” (36).

The mothers from the corpus show how the range of working choices for women has extended in time, but these choices have commonly been subordinated to the idea that mothers should tend to the necessities of others. This extension of choices has not occurred at a stable and coherent pace, as proved by the difficulties that Zoe Kruller encounters when she wants to change from combining her role as a mother with a traditionally female job to becoming a mother who sings with a band.

### **3.4.2 Work for Self-Realization: Zoe's And Nada's Artistic Inclinations. Creativity and Procreativity**

In the corpus, some of the mothers are full-time housewives, but many of them also have some kind of job outside the home sphere. Characters like Clara and Helene adopt a more traditional role as housewives who do not have a remunerated job and assume most of the household tasks. Some other characters, like Nada, Loretta, Corinne and Zoe combine their work as housewives and other remunerated jobs, whereas Arlette works as a volunteer for the community. Some of them find opposition or derision when developing these tasks, but in any case,

they are developing their identities and increasing their sense of autonomy within the couple and the family by means of their participation in the public sphere. Thus, women in the corpus often have more interests than merely becoming mothers, and sometimes work outside the home becomes a means to develop and express their broader interests.

Nada's and Zoe's cases are especially representative: they both are pioneer characters in the corpus who challenge their societies and communities by trying to find fulfillment and self-realization in professional careers and productive activities which are not primarily designed to complement their domestic motherly roles, thus breaking the traditional constraints on women and mothers by working as a professional writer and a singer, respectively. This is an especially complex situation in the case of Nada, whose relationship with her son is deeply affected by her life choices. Zoe's family, in contrast, accepts slightly better her artistic interests. Finally, the fact that both women significantly die violently may be interpreted as a kind of social punishment for having challenged the patriarchal hierarchy by not conforming exclusively to their role as mothers.

The 1980s featured the ultra-conservative administration of Ronald Reagan, who was in office from 1981 to 1989. The President relied on individual initiative, favored the marketplace instead of bureaucratic regulations to govern economic decisions, called for greater expenditure for the army and reduced federal spending on social programs (Garraty 892). In this manner, the general social trend of the decade hindered or invalidated some of the previous advances, which in fact in conservative regions like upstate New York small towns (such as Sparta in *Bird*), were never fully implanted. Zoe Kruller's career reflects this.

In contrast with Helene and Mrs. Pedersen, Zoe does not utterly renounce to her individual self for the sake of her role as a mother, and as a consequence she has a more comfortable attitude toward motherhood, although it is not exempt from ambiguity. She loves her son, but as her best friend recalls,

[s]he used to say how guilty she felt about Aaron, it wasn't really meant for her to be a mother so young, she'd

dropped out of high school and married Delray who was older than her by six or seven years but still a hotheaded kid himself. Not that Zoe didn't love her baby but she never felt she'd been meant to be a mother just then. Like Delray wasn't meant to be a father. (*Bird* 129-130)

Zoe's marriage could be defined as a "babes-in-the-woods marriage," in which the members have not successfully mastered a particular developmental level (Sauber et al. 25). In general, Zoe is satisfied with her decision of having a child, but she regrets not having been able to choose a more suitable time: she speculates that it would have been better to acquire a career as a singer first, and then have a baby, since being a mother when you are too young "gets in the way of your life" (*Bird* 130).

In this case, the social order affects and distorts the experience of the mother. Zoe was biologically and physiologically ready and willing to be a mother, but the social order forced her to get married in order to have children. Zoe was then prepared for the experience of motherhood but not for assuming the role of an institutional mother in the form of marriage. Besides, as Zoe's words suggest, the social order claims the incompatibility of procreation (motherhood) and creation (her career as a singer). This results in the perception that motherhood represents an obstacle in her career.

Zoe stands in direct contrast to Mrs. Pedersen and Helene because she is able to attain a more balanced relation between motherhood and other aspects of her identity. She does neither renounce to motherhood nor erase her self, or her alternative interests or ambitions. Despite the rigid gender environment of her small town, Zoe decides not to conform to her situation and tries to succeed professionally with her band. Her violent death at the hands of a lover could be interpreted as a punishment on the part of society for her promiscuity, for having abandoned her husband to pursue an artistic career and thus for not having assumed her role as a wife and a mother as her only identity trait: according to the town's morality, "[t]he life Zoe had been living, something like this was bound to happen..." (*Bird* 136, emphasis in the original).

At the beginning, Zoe lives with her family and works at a dairy, a job traditionally ascribed to women. She is a well-integrated member of her community. However, after she leaves her family and job and focuses on her career as the singer of a bluegrass band, the town starts to envision her as an irresponsible mother and wife who places her selfish whims before her family's well-being. Zoe's artistic and independent aspirations are despised because she is defying the social conventions that tie her to the domestic sphere; or, at most, to a "female" job which does not violate her subordination to her family roles.

At this point, it becomes plain that the men of Zoe's life (her husband Delray, her lover Anton Csaba and her son Aaron) wish to control and possess her. Zoe's family claims her possession appealing to their kin relationship, as Michael Mulvaney does with her daughter Marianne in *Mulvaney's*, whereas Anton tries to control her due to their intimate relationship. Despite this, Zoe claims her own space both in the private and the public spheres even before she leaves her family, as eight-year-old Aaron realizes during one of Black River Breakdown's concerts:

there was Zoe in her sparkly red dress and high-heeled shoes looking so beautiful you just stared and stared, seeing yes it was Zoe, it was Mommy yet at the same time a stranger with a special connection to the crowd that adored her singing her best-known song "Little Bird of Heaven" at a fast bright pace so different from the way she'd sung this song to Aaron, as a lullaby when he'd been a small child thinking it was a special song just for him, that Mommy had made up. *Who's my little bird of heaven?* Zoe had asked [...] *You are my little bird of heaven.* And now to Aaron [...] it was unsettling and disturbing, it was a betrayal to hear Zoe sing the song he'd believed was special to him [...] and to see Mommy smiling and winking at the audience of strangers. (*Bird* 268, emphasis in the original)

The child needs to integrate these two dimensions of Zoe: a popular singer with a public image, and his dear mother who focuses her



attention exclusively on him back home. Aaron is hurt that the song he considered so special for both of them is so willingly offered to all those strangers: she is exposing their intimacy, it appears to him, out in the open.

Despite his confusion, Aaron seems rather sensitive and understanding toward the situation, and strives to actually accommodate the public and private sides of his mother:

Aaron understood: Zoe was a singer with a band, and this was what you did, if you were a singer—you dressed in special costume-clothes, you stood up on the stage at a microphone, you smiled and sang [...] Aaron understood and yet—Aaron was hurt [...] He wanted to be proud of his mother. He did not want to think how Mommy had betrayed him, that was a wrong thing to think Aaron knew, a baby-way of thinking, he was older now, and happy for his mother except it made him feel strange. (*Bird* 269)

Aaron is conscious of the need to overcome his infantile attachment to his mother and to acknowledge that her life does not exclusively revolve around him. He is much less possessive than Richard from *Expensive*, who is totally unable to draw such conclusions, despite being three years older than Aaron. Aaron is able to perceive Zoe as his mother and as a singer, unlike Richard, who cannot integrate the familial and professional aspects of Nada's identity. Aaron is also much more mature and sensitive than his father Delray, who holds restrictive patriarchal views of his wife's performance: "*Showing off your body like that. Don't tell me you aren't. The way you move your mouth, too. Think I can't see?*" (*Bird* 270, emphasis in the original).

When Zoe moves out of the family house, Aaron has mixed feelings once more:

You can't help being resentful. Like with Zoe who'd stopped loving him in that special way. Like a mother loves you no matter what and will always forgive you except one day this love can wear out, you're on your own. He'd gotten too big for her, maybe. How was this Aaron's fault! (*Bird* 256)

Aaron is angered because he thinks that his mother has abandoned him, when in fact she has simply abandoned her husband and the family house. By doing so, Zoe has modified the conditions of her status as an institutional mother, but has not forsaken her son: she is still his mother in terms of motherhood as experience.

In general, Aaron is sympathetic toward his mother's situation: "*he'd like to think it isn't because of him, she'd gotten fed up being his mother like she'd gotten fed up with being Delray Kruller's wife, who could blame her?*" (*Bird* 245, emphasis in the original). However, he also has divergent reactions to Zoe's career, reflected on his personality, which is split in two. On the one hand, he is "Aaron," an innocent boy named by his mother; on the other hand, he is "Krull," an unpredictable and violent young man whose nickname was chosen by older boys. The genesis of Krull is to be found when eleven-year-old Aaron discovers his mother and her lover Edward Diehl having intimate relations in a car. Thus, Krull initially develops as the embodiment of the loss of innocence of this character. Aaron/Krull is one of the instances of doppelgänger characters in the corpus.

Krull does not only provide Aaron with the strength he needs to survive his harsh living conditions, he also represents his wiser side: "Krull knew all about Aaron, but Aaron knew little about Krull" (*Bird* 282). As he grows up, the narrator will increasingly refer to this character as Krull, especially upon those occasions in which the boy is in need of strength or shrewdness; or in those in which he behaves aggressively. Thus, the dichotomy Aaron/Krull is not that of a positive-peaceful/negative-violent character, but shows many nuances.

In cases of splitting, these traits may indicate the appearance of social pathologies propitiated by trauma and mourning, such as "patterns of acting out sexually or in other ways, aggressive behaviors, excessive intake of alcohol or other drugs, or antisocial behaviors" (Raphael and Dobson 51). Aaron (or more specifically, Krull) presents all these characteristics: he molests Krista, bullies Ben, and frequently takes drugs. His aggressive behavior toward Edward Diehl's children is perhaps also founded in a wish to revenge and in the irrational feeling that "if the person responsible could be found the loss could somehow be prevented or undone" (Parkes 100). As Aaron does not have the

occasion of harming Edward, whom he considers his mother's murderer, he uses his children as scapegoats upon which he can discharge his rage and impotence; especially on Ben, on whom he takes revenge: "*Now you know, what I can do to you. Any time. What you deserve, your father killed my mother*" (Bird 330, emphasis in the original).

Aaron's bullying is just episodic, because he does not really possess the distinctive traits of a bully but only adopts them during his process of mourning. However, his attacks on Ben show enough features of bullying to allow us to compare and contrast his behavior with this type of violence.

MacNeil (248-250) comments on the main characteristics of bullying, which he defines as repeatedly harming another person by means of a physical attack or by hurting another's feelings through words, actions, or social exclusion. A lack of involvement by bystanders enflames the bully's actions and increases the humiliation and isolation of the victim. Much bullying takes place in school areas where supervision is limited: the lunchroom, the playground, hallways and restrooms. In the novel, Aaron bullies Ben in the locker room and in isolated areas.

It is important to notice that during these bullying episodes, Aaron is referred to as Krull, the embodiment of Aaron's most dangerous inclinations. MacNeil describes the most common traits of bullies (248-249). The bully is physically, verbally, and/or socially stronger than the victim, and tends to have poor self-concepts and limited feelings of being beloved or important to significant people in their lives. Aaron probably harbors such feelings: he possibly feels rather lonely, since his mother has just died and his father does not pay much heed to him.

A common denominator among bullies is the tendency to use force when facing problematic situations, and indeed, Aaron's bullying of Ben is a strategy to alleviate his troubled emotional state. Typically, bullies have little empathy for their victims. This is another trait in which Aaron differs from standard bullies: he does feel some empathy for Ben, and that is why he eventually stops stalking him.

At the beginning, Aaron simply insults and pushes Ben. He later on slaps, kicks and punches him. Ben passively resists the assaults until

he eventually counterattacks by drawing out a jackknife and cutting Aaron's hands in the subsequent struggle. Enraged, Aaron briefly considers killing Ben, but refrains from it when he thinks of the consequences that such an action could have, and decides to leave him alone, after yelling "Could kill you—see? Tell your son of a bitch father! Tell him 'Aaron Kruller could've killed you, and he didn't.' You tell him" (*Bird* 334). Aaron feels that this somehow "settles the score:" "*This is a good thing. Something is decided*" (*Bird* 334, emphasis in the original), he reflects. He believes that his decision not to kill Ben has been an act of mercy. Although he might not realize, the most crucial part of this decision is that Aaron has proved to himself that he can rectify his mistakes and make better choices in the future. He can become a citizen, as one of his teachers has assured him, and this represents the first step he takes in this direction.

Aaron's realization of the power of his will is also a mark of the evolution of Oatesian characters who gradually become liberated from the constraints of determinism. There is an enormous difference between Swan's tormented youth in *Garden* as he follows the path of violence to which he feels chained, and Aaron's conscious decision not to become what most of the community expects from him, a dropout student with criminalistic tendencies, but instead, an honest citizen. Aaron has written his own fate despite all the predictions working against him; while Swan has never really believed he had any other option but to meet his destiny.

Aaron's aggressiveness is then associated with his inability to come to terms with the loss of his mother and to accept its consequences, and for this reason it accompanies him until he is able to start a true mourning process: as his anger dissolves while he grows older, he starts to dwell on Zoe's happy memories and to forget his ill feelings toward her: he wants "to keep his good memories [...] of Zoe—what they've been when Aaron was a little boy" (*Bird* 252).

Zoe's attempt to develop other sides of her personality by pursuing an artistic career and becoming a singer is echoed in Nada's wish for an independent self in *Expensive*, where, as Creighton argues, the tension between the maternal demands of selflessness and the wish for cultivating an individual sense of self are best exemplified (*Joyce* 61).

Nada reflects the duality of creativity (writer) and procreativity (mother), dramatized in the traditional belief that a woman cannot exert both roles. Nada's situation is complicated by her socioeconomic ambition, which leads her to subordinate the two sides of her identity to her role as a socialite in a high-class world that fascinates her; as a consequence, her submission to her socioeconomic ambition hinders the possibilities of acquiring personal satisfaction either as a writer, or through the experience of motherhood. The situation is even further complicated by the fact that Nada is also unable to acquire personal satisfaction in her superficial role as a socialite. Due to this, she demands an independence that leads her to temporarily abandon her family upon three occasions.

*Expensive's* plot takes place between the 1950s and 1960s. During the postwar period, there was a renewed interest in culture. Sales of paperbacks, which had been introduced in 1939, greatly ascended; but this did not always benefit writers: unknown authors found it difficult to make a living, because publishers tended to favor famous authors. J. D. Salinger became the most popular writer of the 1950s with his novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which sold around two million copies. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1955) also became very popular (Garraty 856-857).

The perception of Nada in the novel is obtained through the point of view of her son Richard, who is (as he recognizes) highly subjective. Richard refuses to assume that Nada's identity may be constituted by concurrent roles as mother and writer, and thus he tries to exclusively categorize her as either a mother or a non-mother. Since Nada is not inclined to assume exclusively the role of mother, the only option that Richard (unlike Aaron Kruller) conceives for her is being a non-mother (either as a writer, as a socialite, or as an independent personality). In the range of common expectations available for women, this is equivalent to being nothing ("nada" in Spanish).

In any case, Richard is aware of his difficulties to portray his mother's true identity:

she did exist outside of me, I can see her or half-see her, she did exist, she was a quite independent being. Two Nadas existed—the one who was free and who abandoned

me often, and the other who has become fixed irreparably  
in my brain, an embryonic creature of my own making.  
(*Expensive* 90)

Most possibly, none of these versions is the real Nada, who is inaccessible from the text. This quote, however, represents one of Richard's more lucid assertions, because he is acknowledging a split between two Nadas: the one who is free and independent from him and the motherly role he demands, and the other that is a creation of an ideal traditional mother in his own brain and does not exist in real life. As we shall see, Richard tries to create Nada as a mother as if she were a literary character, in a reversal of motherhood's biological capacity of procreation. In fact, the core of his twisted and troubled relationship with Nada resides precisely in Richard's appreciation of himself in literary terms as a character (that is, a literary creation) of his mother rather than as Nada's biological son.

Nada, who comes from a modest environment, has gained access to the affluent life she had always dreamt of through marriage, and although she enjoys all the comforts of this lifestyle, she does not appear to be completely satisfied. Nada's climbing up of the social ladder by means of marriage is parallel to Clara's social ascension in *Garden*. Nada constantly tries to protect and maintain her position within this social order, even when it does not seem to be endangered. She is obsessed with belonging in this world into which she was not born.

The environment in which Nada tries so desperately to fit (the luxurious suburbs of Detroit, from which many female teenage Oatesian characters will run away in other works, as we shall explain), is characterized by a rampant shallowness and hypocrisy, just as the characters who inhabit them. As Johnson argues, this environment is permeated by a lack of community and emotional context (*Understanding* 57). This inter-influence of environment and characters is typical of Oates's work. Inside these suburbs, houses are also of uppermost relevance as symbols of status. Araújo comments on Nada's so-called "intoxication" with the family house, asserting that her reductive motto is "Location, location, location." But ironically, she becomes entrapped by the very space that shapes her privileged status, which is the very space she had pursued all her life. *Expensive* is thus a

narrative grounded in property (403-404). The yearning to possess is not only reflected in material goods but also perceived in the interactions among characters, most notably in that of Nada and Richard.

In order to fit in this socioeconomic suburban world, Nada exerts her literary creativity by transforming herself into a fictional character (a socialite) who paradoxically despises this same creative ability as improper for this shallow social environment, since according to Rich,

[t]he ancient, continuing envy, awe, and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other female aspect of creativity. Not only women have been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual or aesthetic creations were inappropriate, inconsequential, or scandalous, an attempt to become “like men,” or to escape from the “real” tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing. (40)

This is then the first reason why Nada rejects her writing career: she seems to have assumed the prevalence of aforementioned patriarchal limitation from her social circle to the extent that she tries to conceal her intellectual interests and work in order to fit in the community, not realizing that her acquaintances are sincerely interested in her art. Thus, Nada refuses to discuss her writing with them, and even with her family. Although she is actually a highly intelligent woman, she pretends to be dumb, while trying to accommodate to her social context by becoming a charming and vacuous party hostess for her circle of friends, as well as the socialite mother of an accomplished child of whom she can be proud. Nada’s reservation toward her writing is also exerted at home, where she does not let her family enter her study, or allows Richard to read her work. We may thus conclude that although she keeps writing, Nada prioritizes her facet as a socialite over her facet as a writer or mother: she feels that cultivating her artistic inclinations is at odds with her role as a mother and a celebrated socialite in the wealthy social class to which she belongs. As Creighton says, she puts on the image of the suburban matron (*Joyce* 61).

Nada holds these views because she perceives her neighborhood as a kind of old bourgeoisie, prompt to despise artistic inclinations. Boesenberg points out that Nada's strategies of adjustment are in consonance with the time in which she lives, before the women's movement revised traditional notions of femininity and emphasized the legitimacy of a woman's professional and artistic inspirations; so that she can only conceive her writing as a hobby, a charming skill (383).

According to Welldon, many professional women underplay their capacities or regard them with incredulity or shame because they are aware that they may represent a rebellion against traditional gender constraints, since intellectual work has been considered a male's realm. This undervaluing of women's intelligence has been often counterbalanced by an overrating of the female body as an epitome of femininity, a characteristic which is perceived in Nada: she underscores her own smartness but is careful to present herself as impeccable and beautiful as possible (29).

As a consequence of all this, we may consider that in order to participate in this socioeconomic suburban universe, Nada transforms herself into a character thus somehow exerting her literary creative skills: she practically erases her identity in order to become a character of her own creation, a bourgeoisie mother. Thus, in Nada we find a confusion between being a writer and a character; a conflict that Richard, too, will experience.

Through the narrative, Richard tries to discover who his mother really was, without reaching a satisfactory conclusion: she remains forever elusive. At the beginning, her origins are enigmatically portrayed:

Nada's people were a mystery. She spoke of them vaguely and with some embarrassment: émigrés, obviously, but shadowy and remotely threatening. They had a minimum of power in their new life, Nada told people. [...] Her parents were exiled nobility, perhaps, dying broken-hearted in a vulgar, foreign land. I recall something about a hotel in New York City where other Russians were, shadowy intrigue, futility. She hinted that her father was not quite admirable, perhaps unbalanced, that her mother



was wrecked by the great journey, and that she, Natashya, only child, was born in squalor and had tasted it. (*Expensive* 18)

Nada presents her family's past as a romantic tale of misery. Richard finds it strange that her mother introduces the issue of power when describing her Family System of Origin, but this is not actually surprising at all, because Nada, along with many Oatesian characters (Richard himself included), is obsessed with acquiring control.

Upon Nada's death, Richard discovers that she does not come from a glamorous Russian background as she had always claimed, but from a Catholic Ukrainian family, composed by "not emigrés (sic) but immigrants" (*Expensive* 231) whose escape from Europe was not political but caused by economic impoverishment. She is not named "Natashya Romanov" but "Nancy Romanow," born in the small town of North Tonawanda, in upstate New York.

Nada has reimagined and reconstructed her past and modified her identity in order to alter not only her external image, but also the very way in which she sees herself. She tries to fit reality into her illusions and ambitions, and she does this by narrating her imaginary family life to others: she constructs a glamorous past that has nothing to do with her real ordinary upbringing. In fact, Nada's real and modified surnames, along with her illusory journey from Europe, immediately bring to mind the popular legends about the Great Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova, the youngest daughter of tsar Nicholas II of Russia, escaping from the Bolshevik execution of her family in 1918, a rumor which was popularized due to the fact that her remains were not positively identified until 2009. Nada's self-creation also recalls that of Anna Anderson, a Polish immigrant who posed as the Great Duchess Anastasia during the 1920s (Maugh n. p.): for both Anderson and Nada, the fantastic glamorous fable comes to replace their authentic impoverished past. Nada rejects so her actual origins and becomes a fiction herself by constructing a fake past and present identity that does not completely satisfy her, because she can fully incarnate neither her original self nor her new creation. For her son, she resembles a mask, with nothing true behind it.

While creating this identity as a socialite, Boesenberg notices that Nada simultaneously accepts and undermines her contemporary codes of gender and class; that is, Nada accepts the social conventions of her community to the extent that she conceals and disguises her own past and her true identity, but at the same time she feels constrained by its ties. She achieves the desired upward social mobility by marriage, after transforming herself into the supreme object of male's gaze, one of the "expensive people." "Possessing" her would be a symbol of financial power and social status. In a telling substitution, when she is murdered, the newspaper prints a photograph of her house instead of herself (382). Richard's words summarize the gender prejudices of the time which emphasize the external appearance of women as a desirable and power-infusing quality:

You women, wouldn't you like to be like Nada as she appeared to outsiders? [j] you men, you would all like a Nada of your own. If your income is above a certain level you'd need her to show it off, wouldn't you? (*Expensive* 83)

In Boesenberg's summarizing words, the narrator realizes that Nada is enacting a script imposed on her by the hegemonic culture embodied in the suburb where they live (379).

Therefore, by choosing to repress one of her most distinctive traits, she actually appears to become what her family nickname "Nada" means: "nothing." This nickname also accounts for her tendency to frivolity, but it is essential here to remember that this character is exclusively presented through the eyes of her son, and perhaps she is not as hollow as she seems. Richard considers that she is turned into nothing, but in fact he seems to be unable to perceive his mother as a whole being full of complexities and inconsistencies.

According to Johnson, *Expensive* criticizes America's materialism and the moral and psychological consequences of the American dream at the time. The Everetts represent the dark side of the American ideal: they are united by money and not love. They live on appearances which conceal an emotional void (*Understanding* 50, 54). The myth of the

American dream brings to mind Francis Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a character that Nada resembles.

The complex relationship between Nada and Richard is explored in the corresponding section of this chapter. In the present section, we shall simply introduce Richard's relationship with his mother's profession, since he identifies it as a serious threat for her motherly role. Richard is terribly troubled by his mother's inclination to hide her talent, which in his opinion demeans her; but at the same time, he is jealous of the time and attention that writing takes away from him. He also resents that, in his opinion, she is more sympathetic toward her characters than she is to real people. Thus, both Nada and Richard are immersed in a conflict stemming from their prejudices: Nada is influenced by patriarchal assumptions of female dependence on males, and so she can only conceive achieving a good social position through her marriage and her socialite role instead of her work as a writer; and Richard does not totally accept her mother's profession as a writer, because he is convinced that motherhood is incompatible with a career.

Richard is upset about his mother's attitude because, following social expectations, he expects Nada to behave as an ideal mother according to the canons of motherhood as institution: he would thus like to reduce her to her role as a mother. He is only interested in the breeding Nada at the expense of the creative and independent Nada. In other words, Richard perceives a conflict between Nada's ascribed role as a mother and her achieved role as a mother-writer, and he identifies his mother's artistic inclinations as the reason for the gap existing between them. Thus, for him, his mother's creativity represents a means "to escape from the 'real' tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing" (Rich 40).

Showalter points out that the main concern of *Expensive* is "as much with the conflict of creativity and procreativity for the woman writer as with actual motherhood" ("Quartet" xx). The interconnections between female creativity and motherhood are closely related to the conflict of the mother-child subsystem which Richard eventually attempts to solve in the climax of the novel.

In conclusion, Nada experiences the dichotomy between creativity and procreativity in a manner that deforms both her literary career and

her maternal experience, as well as her relationship with Richard; but it is not clear if she perceives them as incompatible terms. In her case, both roles are subordinated to her socioeconomic ambition, which leads her to assume a fictitious and hollow role and to become an artificial character instead of a combination of writer/mother, creator/procreator. In any case, Nada never completely abandons her creative and procreative identities, which suggests that she believes in the compatibility of both facets. Moreover, given that Richard is the narrator of the story, perhaps it is his obsession with this dichotomy that truly originates this distortion, since it is him the one who considers that these two facets are mutually exclusive.

In conclusion, both Zoe and Nada assume professional artistic activities that are not strictly related to their activity as mothers; that is, they are not aimed at gaining money for raising their children. Instead, they are associated to both women's interests in self-realization: while Zoe becomes a singer, Nada is a famous writer.

Zoe encounters some opposition to the decision of abandoning her traditionally female job on the part of both her family and her community, an opposition that increases when she leaves her family home to live on her own and chase her dreams of becoming a famous singer. Despite this, she does not neglect her son, achieving thus a rather healthy balance between her role as a mother and a singer.

Nada's situation is far more complex, because in her case, fiction and reality, character and real person are intermixed in an almost indistinguishable manner. Through marriage she gains access to a wealthy social position she wishes to maintain. In order to do so, she creates a glamorous (fictional) past for herself, as if she were a character of one of her stories. Ironically, her fake social role prevents her from giving prominence to her writing career, because she erroneously considers that she will lose her social status by focusing on her artistic side. It is possible that, unlike her son, she perceives creativity and procreativity as compatible options; but in any case, she subordinates them to her role as a socialite, a choice that does not appear to bring much satisfaction to her.

### 3.5 ABORTION

Abortion is one of the most controversial issues related to women's sexual and reproductive lives, which, as we shall explain, is closely tied to gender expectations, and to the control that patriarchy has tried to exert over individual women's lives. The great controversy around abortion is whether it should be legalized or not. As Pollitt argues, the debate over legal abortion is curiously abstract: it has revolved around questions on the personhood of the fetus and its putative moral and legal status, when human life begins, whether the motives for terminating a pregnancy are acceptable or deplorable, as well as the philosophical groundings of each one, etc. The debate has been affected by the interests of the state, the medical profession, assorted religions, the taxpayers, the infertile, among others (n. p.). Pollitt suggests we should contemplate abortion as a real-life social practice from an empirical and historical point of view; that is, she suggests regarding the practice of abortion as the result of historical and social processes in order to understand its demand (n. p.). For this reason, we shall very briefly introduce the history of abortion in the United States and then examine specific examples in Oates's fiction, namely, in the characters from *Expensive*, *Wonderland* and *Son of the Morning*.<sup>23</sup>

As Rich points out, the choices of women regarding sexuality, pregnancy or birth control have always been made within the context of laws and professional codes, religious sanctions and ethic traditions from whose creation women have been historically excluded (128). Moreover, "abortion legislation has always come and gone with the rhythms of economic and military aggression, the desire for cheap labor, or for greater consumerism" (Rich 270). We shall now briefly examine the history of abortion in the United States.

The existence of a legislation allowing or banning abortion has problematized this practice: when abortion is illegal, some physicians have committed themselves to provide safe abortions clandestinely, risking imprisonment, fines, loss of their medical licenses and even attacks of anti-abortion groups. Otherwise, many women suffer from health complications derived from botched, unsanitary, or self-induced

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<sup>23</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Son*.

abortions, and many of them die. Others are left infertile or with chronic illness and pain (“History of Abortion” n. p.).

Before 1880 abortion was widely practiced in the United States, but after that year, it was banned by most states except to save the mother’s life (“History of Abortion” n. p.). Ironically, the movement to criminalize abortion was initially supported by physicians, whom a century later would play an important role in its legalization. This was partly a professional move attempted to establish the supremacy of “regular” physicians over midwives and homeopaths (Pollitt n. p.). Thus, apart from the recurrently mentioned moral issues, patriarchal and business interests played a definite role in this question.

During the Great Depression, illegal abortion rates increased (Ravitz n. p.). But between the 1940s and the 1950s, organized medicine and the law combined to force clinics which performed safe abortions out of business. In the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement was organized, and reproductive rights became a priority among its goals, since the movement associated abortion rights to gender equality. People fought, marched, and lobbied in order to attain safe and legal abortions (“History of Abortion” n. p.).

On January 22nd 1973, the United States Supreme Court abolished all existing criminal abortion laws in the milestone *Roe v. Wade* trial, thus granting women the right to terminate pregnancies through abortion in the first trimester (Pollitt n. p.). The legalization of abortion was, in Leslie J. Reagan’s view, a logical response to the times: the Supreme Court was simply responding to a decade-long popular petition for change (qtd. in Pollitt n. p.).

During the 1990s there was a wave of violence against abortion clinics and medical staff which resulted in the death of several people (Kliff n. p.), as reflected in Oates’s novel *A Book of American Martyrs*, which clearly depicts the polarized positions of both parts, which made mutual understanding impossible. Besides, repeated challenges since 1973 narrowed the scope of *Roe v. Wade* but did not fully abolish it: states have enacted 1074 laws restricting access to abortion from that year until nowadays (Ravitz n. p.).

In general, as Pollitt notices, anti-abortion sentiment has been connected to anti-feminism (n. p.). Rich comments that the demand to

make abortion legal has been represented as “a form of irresponsibility, a refusal by women to control their moral destiny, a trivialization or evasion of great issues of life and death” (266). Moreover, the antiabortion movement tries to drive a single monolithic wedge into a cluster of issues such as male sexual prerogatives, prescriptive heterosexuality, women’s economic disadvantage, racism, the prevalence of rape and paternal incest (Rich xx). This movement also underestimates

women’s impulses toward education, independence, self-determination as self-indulgence. Its deepest unwritten text is not about the right to life, but about women’s right to be sexual, to separate sexuality from procreation, to have charge over our procreative capacities. (Rich xx-xxi)

Alternatively, feminist and pro-abortion groups emphasize the need to provide safe abortions, and to include them in medical insurances. They argue that access to safe and legal abortion is essential to women’s health and well-being, and prevents unhealthy clandestine abortions and dangerous self-abortions. Reagan argues that abortions have been widely practiced since time memorial, and that the real reason of making abortion a crime is to expose and humiliate women who decide to have an abortion; that is, it represents a message to all women about the possible consequences of violating official gender norms (qtd. in Pollitt n. p.).

From Reagan’s perspective, the anti-abortion movement has clear gender undertones that attempt to regulate women’s reproductive choices by reducing each individual case to an abstract debate over the morality of abortion (qtd. in Pollitt n. p.): this blurs the specific personal and particular circumstances in order to merge them under an authoritative patriarchal voice.

### **3.5.1 Abortion in Oates’s Corpus**

In the corpus, there are some miscarriages (namely, Clara’s and Loretta’s), but none of the female characters has a voluntary abortion. However, both Nada and Helene consider having an abortion performed, and Elsa’s father in *Son* tries to force her to have one. In

these three cases, Oates recreates situations in which abortion does not represent a free choice for the female characters, but rather a source of conflict with male characters who try to limit and manipulate their capacity to make decisions. All these women live at a time when abortion is illegal in the United States. This section examines the experience of these three characters.

In the case of Nada and Helene, their consideration of having an abortion may be an expression of their rejection of the role of institutional mother, which in their case becomes a threat to the experience of motherhood. Elsa's case is more complex: her pregnancy is the result of a gang rape, but she wishes to have the child against the opinion of her father, who insists on having an abortion performed on her. Thus, the girl is twice submitted to male violence: initially, in the form of the rape; and later on, in the psychological coercion of the father's authority.

In *Expensive*, Nada gets pregnant at the end of the 1940s (Richard is born in 1949) and considers having an abortion. The novel only offers an account of this period from the perspective of her husband Elwood, who recounts the experience to his son:

It started with her pregnant, and maybe she wanted to flit around a little more and blush over the compliments she got for her ass, or her stories, or both—you know her!—and she started acting nuts right then, a lovely young girl of twenty and already cracking up, selfish like an oyster you can't pry open and the only way you can get it to recognize you is to smash it against the wall! Well, she was pregnant and stayed out late, sitting around brooding in the park and maybe picking up stray niggers that wouldn't object to a round back in the bushes, even with a nut that wouldn't wear stockings to her own wedding until I said to her, What the hell are you pulling? [...] then when she got pregnant she went nuts and said how she wanted to have an abortion and stayed away in some goddam hotel and had the doctor all lined up [...] and it was a matter of money, and she called me up and started screaming over the phone and calling me every filthy name she knew [...]. And then she called me up next morning and said no, she



didn't want the abortion, and she talked about it the way you talk about buying a new car [...] then she changed her mind again and said she did want it, she couldn't live with me and couldn't have any kid of mine. (*Expensive* 96)

Elwood appears to be hurt by Nada's excluding him from the decision of having an abortion. He is clearly against it, since he directly associates it with insanity, ascribing it to what he describes as Nada's previous episodes of irrationality, like her refusal to wear stockings. He considers that her wish to have an abortion is mere selfishness, and by doing so he is denying Nada the right to take decisions that affect not only her body but also her future life.

From Elwood's words, it might be deduced that Nada did not wish to have a child, or to bond herself in such a manner with her husband. Whichever her reason is, Nada's doubts about having Richard affect the child in a negative manner because they add to his feeling that his mother does not want him.

Significantly, we do not have Nada's point of view upon this subject: this metaphorically emphasizes the domination that her husband has tried to impose on her by trying to control her reproductive choices. He has succeeded not only in doing so, but has also appropriated the narrative of her experience, undoubtedly transforming and distorting it in the process. In any case, we might deduce that Nada feels insecure about entering motherhood (both motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience). This is possibly caused by the tension between the supposed maternal selflessness and her need to maintain her individual self.

In *Wonderland*, Helene considers performing an abortion upon herself in the first half of the 1950s. Rich lists some of the methods that women used to induce abortions:

self-abortion by wire coat-hangers, knitting needles, goose quills dipped in turpentine, celery stalks, drenching the cervix with detergent, lye, soap, Ultra-gel (a commercial preparation of castor oil, soap, and iodine), drinking purgatives of mercury, applying hot coals to the body [j]  
(266-267)

Of course, these methods caused the death of many women. As for Helene, she plans to use a knitting needle:

She would find a hotel, rent a room [...] she would run hot water in the bathtub and undress and sit in the tub, her legs slowly spreading. She would ease the thing up into herself. Angrily and calmly. Its pressure would be very sharp and very thin, unlike the broad, coarse pressure Jesse brought to her. Pressure. Then a sudden sighing release as the needle sank in. The water pinkening with blood. What she must remember is *to leave the tub unplugged and the water on*. That way there would be a continual flow of fresh water, splashing and hot. The blood would drain out and new water will rush in and everything will be clean. (*Wonderland* 298, emphasis in the original)

Helene's imaginary abortion recreates the experience of sexual intercourse, which is described as uncomfortable and unpleasant: Helene affirms that her husband Jesse brings pressure into her, which symbolically reflects the pressure she has felt when motherhood was imposed to her. The parallelism between both moments shows how due to the interference of the patriarchal ideology, the sexual intercourse that she feels compelled to have becomes as destructive as the abortion she is planning to perform upon herself: for her, sexual intercourse with her husband results in the destruction of her own self rather than the creation of a new life through her pregnancy. As a result, the potentially harmonious relationship between her body, sexuality and reproduction is shattered. In other words, influenced by the patriarchal imposition of the institution of motherhood that preaches women's utter devotion to their motherly roles, Helene's experience of motherhood (including sexual intercourse) is distorted.

In her vision, Helene appears simultaneously relaxed and annoyed, as if she needed a certain amount of wrath to cause such damage to herself. At the same time, her determination provides her with a certain relief for her anxiety. The use of water as a means of purification is relevant here: it not only eliminates the remains of blood (she refers to this fluid as "impersonal dirt") but also symbolically sends Helene to a kind of previous virginal state which she possibly longs for, since she

feels a deep disgust for sexual intercourse; accordingly, she has recently proclaimed that her name is not Helene Vogel but Helene Cady, her maiden name, a social identity that she seems to miss.

In *Wonderland*, self-abortions are further featured when Jesse, a doctor, treats the injured resulting from them at the hospital:

Women showed up at the hospital, bleeding. All the time. Trying to dislodge the flesh inside their wombs, feverish with the need to scrape themselves out. [j] Fetuses as big as a man's fist. Basins of blood. [...] Why so wild? So vicious? Savage as animals turning upon themselves, but also very sly and imaginative. The doctors said they were crazy but Jesse did not think it was that simple. (*Wonderland* 313)

Jesse is more sympathetic toward these women's sheer desperation than his colleagues, but even so he dehumanizes these women labelling them as "animals." Jesse has clear misogynistic tendencies, and although he never learns of Helene's considerations about having an abortion, he is against abortion as a general rule.

The previous passage from *Wonderland* also proves, as Rich asserts, that

the first violence done in abortion is on the body and mind of the pregnant woman herself. [...] It is nothing less than grim, driven desperation which can impel a woman to insert an unbent coat-hanger into her most sensitive parts, to place her body in the hands of a strange man with unverified credentials, or to lie down without anesthesia on a filthy kitchen table, knowing that in so doing she risks illness, grilling by the police, and death. [...] An illegal or self-induced abortion is no casual experience. It is painful, dangerous, and cloaked in the guilt of criminality. Even when performed in a hospital, under the law, abortion is often packaged with sterilization as a kind of punishment for the crime of wishing not to be pregnant. (267)

In the novel *Son*, Oates raises fascinating questions about violence, agency and abortion by presenting a male character who tries to manipulate the choice of a female character over her reproduction, this time by trying to force her to have an abortion. The protagonist Elsa Vickery is gang-raped and gets pregnant at fifteen years old, at the beginning of the 1940s. Elsa's father Thaddeus is comprehensibly horrified about the rape, but he and his eldest son Ashton interpret this event as a personal insult, a reaction that is related to feelings of possessiveness over women, as we shall explain when discussing Marianne Mulvaney's rape in the chapter "Fathers."

In *Son*, Elsa's father's horror is not only caused by the fact that the baby has been begotten by rape, but also by the very fact that his young daughter has conceived a child. As he observed, "Elsa, despite herself, was in a fairly good physical condition: it was chillingly evident that her *body* did not at all mind being pregnant" (*Son* 44, emphasis in the original). Thaddeus repeats once and again that it cannot be possible, while his wife Opal, more realistic, asserts that "[i]t doesn't matter if it's possible or not: the fact is, it *is*" (*Son* 42, emphasis in the original).

Thaddeus decides to find a doctor who would perform an abortion upon Elsa but he is told that it is illegal: the fact that she has been raped does not make any difference to the law. None of his efforts are successful, and Thaddeus thinks that it is due to the fact that everyone knows about the pregnancy, and thus the illegal abortion could have become public knowledge. Revealingly, Thaddeus does not ask his daughter whether she wants to give birth to the child or not. His wife is against the abortion, and she tells him that he is depriving Elsa of her right to decide: "Elsa can live with it and I can live with it. [j] You and Ashton are the ones—you're the ones" (*Son* 51, emphasis in the original). Indeed, the girl wants to give birth to the child: the abortion "would not happen, God would not allow it. She was meant to have the baby" (*Son* 65).

Elsa dislikes being treated as if she were totally unperceptive about the alterations of her own body. She knew at once that she was pregnant due to her physical changes, but her father nonetheless took a sample of her urine to the hospital to make a pregnancy test, downplaying her knowledge. When the result turns positive, Elsa's brother is informed

before her, “which both angered her and made her laugh” (*Son* 62): again, Elsa’s capacity of assuming control of her own life and body is questioned. Elsa’s reaction to the confirmation of the pregnancy, with “no feeling about it to offer them, no surprise or tears or terror” (*Son* 62), causes Thaddeus to prejudge her once more, thinking that Elsa “understands the facts of her condition, but she doesn’t *comprehend*” (*Son* 64, emphasis in the original). He says this in Elsa’s very presence, “as if she were deaf” (*Son* 51, emphasis in the original), which logically enrages her. Thaddeus’s attitude functions also as a manifestation of his inability to assume his daughter’s sexuality, which he must necessarily confront now due to her pregnancy. Similar issues are raised in *Mulvaney*s, where Marianne’s father cannot assume that his teenage daughter is no longer her sweet, innocent and virginal little daughter.

In conclusion, as Reagan argues,

the abortion debate is really an ideological struggle over the position of women. How free should they be to have sexual experiences, in or out of marriage, without paying the price of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood? How much right should they have to consult their own needs, interests, and well-being with respect to childbearing or anything else? How subordinate should they be to men, how deeply embedded in the family, how firmly controlled by national or racial objectives? (qtd. in Pollitt n. p.).

Both Nada and Helene contemplate the possibility of an abortion thus questioning the subordination of their bodies to men’s will: in *Expensive* Nada’s husband openly opposes her right to choose; and in *Wonderland*, Jesse is also against abortion. In the end, both Nada and Helene give birth to children they did not wish to have, pressured by the constrictions of a patriarchal society and the pressures made upon women by motherhood as institution.

Although both women submit to these pressures, Helene does not do so unquestioningly. Years later, she becomes angry when learning about a couple wanting to have an abortion performed upon the woman. Curiously, Helene’s rage is short lived: “Helene felt her face warming with anger. An abstract, mysterious ferocity. Ah, how she hated—But

she did not know exactly what she hated” (*Wonderland* 444). Helene is perhaps unconsciously envious of other women who are able to make that decision freely, and her anger is merely a reflection of the rejection to abortion that a part of society has, including her husband, and that she has assimilated. Accordingly, neither Nada nor Helene find any convincing fulfilment in their role as institutional mothers. On the other hand, in *Son* we perceive men’s questioning of women’s knowledge about their own bodies; and how Elsa challenges her father by making a claim upon her body and her right to make decisions about it by deciding to have her baby against her father’s will.

### **3.6 MOTHER-CHILDREN RELATIONSHIPS**

According to White and Woollett, after childbirth, the nature and intensity of the mother’s feelings are related to their general attitudes rather than their hormone levels. Mothers who consider that babies are interesting and child care is satisfying are more likely to engage with their babies than mothers who do not feel so; and women who do not see themselves in traditional feminine terms may find this quite challenging. Many mothers feel anxiety in the first weeks of the baby’s life. New mothers usually have little experience, and if the reality of mothering does not meet their expectations, they might feel undermined, angry or frustrated. Women who are isolated or not well supported may have no one to talk to about their feelings (23-24), as Clara, who is isolated in the house that Revere buys for her.

Given the fact that the relationship between mothers and daughters tends to differ from the relationship between mothers and sons, these two topics are considered independently. In the same manner, the section of father roles will also include its respective segments about father-daughter and father-son relationships.

#### **3.6.1 Mother-Daughter Relationships**

Although it is essential to analyze each individual case, according to Irigaray, the mother has been forced to “remain forbidden, excluded” (39) in favor of the father-son bond. The author insists on the need to revalue and recover the role of the mother, and mother-children/daughter relationships. As Daly points out, Oates herself,

whose career started in 1964, does not profoundly explore the mother-daughter relation until the 1980s, although it already figures in some of her 1970s novels such as *Childwold* (75). As Creighton and Binette affirm, both in *Childwold* and *Must*, daughters Laney and Enid separate themselves from their mothers in order to construct their own world but finally learn that they have much in common with them, gradually discovering redemptive elements in their mothers' stories (441, 443). Particularly, in *Must*, Enid has often despised her mother Hannah and her submissive position in the family (which gradually changes as she becomes a professional dressmaker). At the end of the novel, however, Enid starts to reevaluate her mother while examining a quilt that Hannah has sewn and that Enid has used all her life: she now appreciates the hard work behind it, as well as all the work that her mother has done for the family.

The mother-daughter relationship is one of the most relevant aspects of a woman's life, and it is often influenced by external ideological forces. We shall examine the connection between Cressida, Juliet and Arlette in *Carthage*; Marianne and Corinne in *Mulvaney's*; Clara and Pearl in *Garden*; Maureen and Loretta in *them*; Shelley and Helene in *Wonderland* and Krista and Lucille in *Bird*.

When discussing how the pre-Oedipal phase works for children, Nancy Chodorow argued that the early mother-daughter relationship is closer than the mother-son relationship, because mothers and daughters have the same sex. Similarly, girls never separate from their mothers as completely as boys do when they grow up (98, 109). The closeness of this bond is undeniable in the corpus, but it does not necessarily imply an identification, as we shall see. On the contrary, it causes a mixture of sensations that are not always easy to assume. The work of Chodorow reflects this: in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she asserts that mother-daughter relations imply patterns of fusion, projection, narcissistic extension, and denial of separateness (103, 137); and that the daughter is, as a consequence, caught between "identification with anyone other than the mother and feeling herself her mother's double and extension" (138). This is a complicated struggle, for daughters need to find a balance between recognizing their mothers in themselves, but also separating from them in order to construct their own identities.

In the following section, we shall examine how Oatesian daughters deal with this dichotomy, while at the same time they relive and reinvent their mother's stories, oscillating among symbiosis with, dependence on, and rejection of them (Creighton and Binette 441).

#### 3.6.1.1 Balanced Relationships: Corinne and Arlette

According to Rich, daughters do not only wish to understand their mothers, but also to acknowledge their need for them. This is not a regressive wish, but a token of women's desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters are a matter of course. It is important then to understand this double vision (225).

Rich argues that women who respect their bodies and feel pride in being female will transmit this attitude to their daughters. The most important thing a woman can do for another woman is to broaden the sense of her actual possibilities. An example of this would be found in a mother who not only fights against the reductive images of women in children's books, movies and school, but who also tries to expand her own life and who refuses to be a victim. Daughters need mothers who want their own freedom as well as their daughters' freedom (245-246). In the corpus, the most self-nurturing mothers, who transmit their self-assuredness to their daughters, are Corinne from *Mulvaney's* and Arlette from *Carthage*.

At the opening of the novel, Corinne is always supportive of her children while at the same time she gives them the necessary freedom to make their own choices: "Corinne prided herself on never having been a mother who fussed over her children; [j] the Mulvaney children were so famously self-reliant and capable of caring for themselves [...] Corinne had a hard time fussing over herself" (*Mulvaney's* 27). The fact that she is not excessively controlling of her children provides them with independence. She also provides her daughter Marianne with autonomy by being a nurturing mother but not excessively overprotective.

Nevertheless, Corinne's attitude changes after Marianne's rape, and this allows us to examine the transformation of her balanced attitude. When her husband Michael proves his inability to deal with the events by stating that he cannot live with his daughter anymore,



Corinne chooses to support him instead of Marianne, and the girl is sent to live with a relative. The full implications of the rape and Michael's abandonment of Marianne are to be analyzed in the next chapter, "Fathers." Presently, we shall simply anticipate her mother's reaction.

After the rape, Corinne is first supportive to Marianne since she feels extremely guilty: "*I'm her mother, it must have been partly my fault*" (Mulvaney's 114, emphasis in the original). Moreover, Corinne is shocked by the effect that Marianne's rape has for the whole family, and she is forced to see that they were not as united as she thought: their image as a perfect family has been definitely shattered. She is hurt when she learns that not even Patrick knew about the rape, and afterwards she cannot understand or accept how the members of the family become increasingly distant.

Corinne, along with Marianne, is the character who most bitterly and closely lives the destruction of the Mulvaney's. Despite the fact that Judd narrates the family tragedy years later, Corinne is the only character who is present during the whole process: the discovery that Marianne has been raped; Marianne's banishment from home; Michael's fall into desperation, alcoholism and disease; the financial unrecoverable debts caused by Michael's futile attempts at bringing the rapist to court; the loss of the family business and the selling of the farm; the dispersal of his sons; etc.

Accordingly, as everything shifts and crumbles around her, Corinne tries to keep everything under control in the best manner she can. She soon finds herself in a difficult position: when her husband finds it impossible to deal with his dear daughter's rape, Corinne feels divided between his needs and the needs of Marianne. When, eventually, she is forced to choose between losing her husband or her daughter, she chooses him, considering that by doing so the family will remain united. She is thus, unwillingly, betraying her daughter.

Corinne used to be a mother that promoted her daughter's independence, but now it is discovered that Corinne herself was less independent than she appeared to be. She was actually subjected to the will of her husband and to her role as a traditional mother. Thus, in a moment of crisis, she betrays Marianne by taking sides with the father, a decision that seems to suggest her submission to the patriarchal order.

She makes this choice because she believes that this is the only way to save the family, and this implies that for her, the family can only exist within the Law of the Father. Once more, the problems of the apparently perfect traditional family are revealed in the corpus. The fact that Corinne is the character that reconstitutes the family at the end of the novel indicates that she has eventually questioned, and subverted, this patriarchal order.

Marianne reacts to this with patience, forgiveness and meekness, considering that she deserves to be banished from home due to her behavior (she feels guilty of her rape, and thus, of its consequences). In the years that follow, Corinne's former affection for Marianne wavers: she is distant and severe to her, possibly to mask her guilt over her abandonment. She openly despises the life that her daughter adopts, travelling from one place to another, and refers to it as a "rag quilt life." This coincides with her adoption of an authoritarian parenting style in substitution of her previous democratic style, which can be partly caused by her stress, sadness and anguish about the destruction of the family.

While her husband is dying, Corinne apologizes to Marianne for "not [having] been a better mother" (*Mulvaney's* 426). She is only able to recognize this when she is freed of her choice of her husband over her daughter; but she does so even before he dies.

Although Corinne's experience as a mother is generally positive, due to the specific traumatic events the family undergoes, she ceases to be a nurturing mother to Marianne. In fact, her attitude increases the girl's shame and feeling of guilt over her rape (which are common effects of such a trauma) because the banishment from home appears to be a sort of punishment for some misconduct. Corinne is not helping her daughter to recover, but confining her into the negative effects of the rape such as self-blame. Marianne, thus, is aware of her need for a mother, but eventually loses this figure.

Like Marianne, other daughters do not willingly separate from their mothers: it is their mothers who somehow reject them. Apart from her, there are several female characters that feel unmothered in the corpus: namely, Helene Vogel, Shelley Vogel and Maureen Wendall, as we shall soon describe.

In *Carthage*, Arlette is an understanding mother who does not wish to interfere in her daughters' private lives: she always respects their intimacy and their need to have some distance at times. Like Corinne, Arlette does not pry in her daughters' lives. As she tells her husband upon his worries that "his" daughter Juliet might be having sex with her boyfriend, "Juliet isn't 'yours' any more than she is mine. Try to be grateful that she's so happy—she's *in love*" (*Carthage* 40, emphasis in the original). Like many other fathers from the corpus (although in a much more attenuated manner), Zeno holds feelings of possession toward his daughters. This issue will be explored in the chapter "Fathers."

As they grow up, the sisters Juliet and Cressida gain independence from their mother Arlette in opposed manners. Cressida tries to gain distance from her parents, especially her mother, from an early age. Influenced by external factors, as we explain in the chapter "Children," she has formed an image of herself as an independent girl who scorns sentimentality and affection, and as a result usually refrains from taking part into family activities; but she is also secretly envious of them. Although she respects her daughters' independence Arlette is deeply hurt about Cressida's detachment and fierce defense of her privacy, which at times implies harshly rejecting her mother.

On the contrary, Arlette and Juliet have a loving and balanced relationship. Arlette is glad to concede privacy to Juliet but of course is worried about her relationship with Brett after he returns from Iraq and the signs of physical abuse she sees on her daughter. Juliet denies being abused, however, and Arlette does not insist. In this case, the respectful distance that Arlette gives to her daughter unintentionally conceals the problems that the girl has in her relationship.

These two mothers, Corinne and Arlette, allow their daughters to make their own decisions, and do not ask for explanations whenever they entail discussing an intimate topic. The attitude of Corinne and Arlette is a breakthrough for women's autonomy, even more valuable if we consider that at least Corinne was not probably given such freedom by her strict mother.

### 3.6.1.2 Deserting Mothers, Motherless Daughters: Clara, Helene, Shelley and Maureen

At times, Rich argues, the interaction between a daughter and her mother becomes so strained that some women feel unmothered. The reasons might vary. On the one hand, some mothers have literally deserted their daughters due to many reasons (death, drugs, madness, the need to work to earn money, etc.). On the other hand, there might be metaphorical desertions, since little girls growing in a male-controlled world may feel terribly unmothered at times. Some other women feel anger toward their mothers due to their mother's victimization and passivity. This passivity mutilates the daughter who is looking for clues as to what it means to be a woman (225, 243).

Daughters may react to this state of being unmothered in two main manners; namely, by looking for a mother figure or by adopting mothering attitudes toward others. Women who feel unmothered may look for a mother all their lives, even look for her in men. Alternatively, they might deny their own vulnerability and loss, and consequently, prove their strength by spending their life "mothering" others; for instance, mothering men whose weakness makes them feel strong; or by being teachers, doctors, political activists, etc. In this manner, they are giving others what they have lacked, but at the same time, they use the dependence that others have on them in order to feel strong. They would perhaps feel uneasy among equals, especially women. At times, women reinforce this mothering attitude toward men by equaling men with children. This is infantilizing to men, and it has also implied a great consumption of women's energies (Rich 213, 242-243).

As Rich points out, although the first contact that women have of warmth, nourishment and security occurs with their mothers, institutionalized heterosexuality (perceived by Rich as utterly different from heterosexuality freely chosen and lived) and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl should transfer these feelings of dependency, eroticism and mutuality to a man. Toward the edge of adolescence, women find themselves drawing back from their natural mother, since it is toward men, henceforth, that their sensual and emotional needs are intended to flow (218, 255).

Helene and Clara are in analogous positions since they grow up without the presence and the support of a mother: both mothers die while the girls are young, a fact that prevents them from developing a close bond with them. They are both literally and metaphorically unmothered. Helene and Clara have different reactions to these abandonments. Helene, unable to recover the bond with her late mother (which appears to have been rather stiff even while she lived), finds many complications in accepting her female body. Thus, she infuses a protective and mothering attitude into her relationship to her husband Jesse, Clara recovers the lost mother-daughter bond by means of a new understanding of her own body when she is pregnant.

Finally, Maureen becomes the most severe case of an unmothered daughter from the corpus: her mother Loretta forces her to become a sort of mother/wife within the family. Besides, Maureen's physical security is put at risk partly due to Loretta's lack of involvement toward her. Realizing this, Loretta changes her attitude and constructs a more nurturing rapport with Maureen, which is not totally reciprocated.

Little is known about Helene's mother, who died when the girl was twelve years old; but, just as her husband, she is said to have referred to intimate questions in an oblique and shamed manner. Of course, when Helene was a teenager, around the 1940s, sexuality was not commonly openly discussed: the publication of Alfred C. Kinsey's revolutionary study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 had caused quite a social shock (Garraty 871). Probably, her mother's reticence contributed to problematize Helene's experience of her own body and sexuality. This, in turn, prevented her from recovering her relationship with her mother by means of the shared experience of the female body.

Helene reacts by adopting a combination of a mothering and a wifely comforting attitude toward her husband; in fact, she decides to marry him sooner than planned when she perceives his vulnerability after he has a distressing incident and a physical fight with their friend Monk: "He had needed her, he had been mute with fear, needing her... she had to marry him, to comfort him..." (*Wonderland* 280). Curiously, Helene and Jesse appear to need to visualize their partner as a vulnerable being, as seen both in this scene and in the episode of the

sheep farm. This could indicate a narcissistic inclination in both characters, who wish to be reminded of their own relevance for, and perhaps superiority to, other people who are weaker than them.

Helene's mothering attitude allows her, first, to tinge her relationship with Jesse with certain asexual tones, a very convenient perception given her dislike for sex. At the same time, Helene, acting as a mother to her partner, confirms Irigaray's remark that mothers are expected to yield to the needs of others while disregarding their own necessities.

A second effect of her mothering inclination toward men is the impossibility to attain a fulfilling relationship with her daughters, since she is more nurturing to her husband than to them. The results of this effect are especially noticeable in Helene's relationship to Shelley, since Helene's situation seems to be replicated in the girl. In Shelley's letters to her father, the girl claims that she does not think about her mother, and repeatedly assures that she does not love her; but her descriptions of anecdotes from childhood reveal that her feelings are more complex than a simple resentment that could perhaps be attributed to a typical adolescent rebellion. Shelley narrates several occurrences in which she felt that her love for her mother was being shunned: once, she gave her a Christmas present, but her mother "couldn't even pretend that she liked it—her face [was] careful, unresponsive" (*Wonderland* 409). Most significantly, when Shelley runs away, Helene tells Jesse that it is better to think of their daughter as dead. She seems to be totally renouncing to her role of Shelley's mother, which she has never fully enjoyed.

Shelley is visibly disappointed by her mother's coldness. At some point, she has a dream about her mother that she describes as a nightmare. In it, she sees Helene as having a bloodless smooth face which is hollowed out, with slopes in place of the eyes, nose and mouth. This quotation suggests that the girl perceives her mother as shallow, cold and indifferent. This lack of identity as a mother, and subsequent lack of rapport with her children, appears to be consistent with Shelley's assertion that it was not her mother, but her father, the one who gave birth to her. Possibly, Shelley is also resentful at her mother for, as Rich suggests, being a victim of her gender and not giving her clues as to

how to be a woman: she does not contribute to the healthy development of her daughter. Shelley's reaction is becoming, in time, a sort of mother to her friends from the counterculture: Noel refers to her as a mother and an "angel," which of course immediately brings to mind resonances of the Victorian myth of the "Angel in the House."

On the contrary, the outcome of Clara's unmothered state is opposed to that of Helene, despite the similarities of their situations: Clara restores the lost link with her mother by means of her bodily experience as a mother. Clara's mother Pearl never develops a close bond to her daughter, perhaps due to a sort of mental or emotional disorder that she is insinuated to have: she rarely speaks as a consequence of her illness. In the corpus, it is usually male characters the ones that are quiet: Pearl is one of the exceptions, along with Maureen. The distance between them is emphasized in the 2006 revision of the novel, which portrays Pearl as either severe or uncaring to her children.

Pearl dies when Clara is a child, and Clara's father starts a relationship with a woman called Nancy, who becomes Clara's stepmother. After Clara runs away from her family, she reminiscences about her mother in a more profound manner than she ever did:

At first, after her mother's death, she hadn't had time to think of her at all. It was something better kept back; it was too awful. Then when Nancy came along it was strange, because to somebody from the outside, the emptiness where Pearl had been wasn't real—Nancy had never known Pearl. So when you were with Nancy the whole idea of Pearl did not make sense. Nancy couldn't remember Pearl so you couldn't talk with her about Pearl, and anyway there was always so much work to do. Fixing meals, taking care of the kids—it eroded everything away and the memory of Pearl was just a small nagging ache. (*Garden* 133)

First of all, the exhausting lifestyle of the family does not provide them with much time for reflection. Besides, Clara does not wish to remember the miserable life her mother had to endure, nor does she have anyone she can confide in.

When Nancy becomes her stepmother, the girl accepts this new bond, but she still senses the emptiness left by her biological mother's absence. Clara does not fully realize the bond she has with her mother until she gets pregnant. It is at this point when she is able to sympathize with her to a greater extent:

She thought of her mother — all those babies gouging themselves out of her, covered by blood, slippery and damp as fish, with no more sense than fish and no value to anyone. And how her mother had died! — she knew more about that night than she had ever let herself think about.  
(*Garden* 214-215)

This quote emphasizes Clara's previous reticence to linger on the memory of her mother, as well as her terrible death from childbirth. Clara had not wanted to acknowledge Pearl's impact over her because it was too painful and obscure for her to evoke, so she buried her mother's memory in her mind for all those years.

Clara's attitude further illustrates Rich's idea that within a patriarchal ideological context mothers are not ultimately considered worthy of deep love and loyalty. As a consequence, women become taboo to women, not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators, etc. Breaking this taboo would allow daughters to reunite with their mothers, and vice versa, thus destroying the taboo (255).

Rich's assertion could appear to be inconsistent with the supposedly high esteem that women receive if they become mothers and perform this role according to the social expectations, but it is actually accurate. Traditionally, mothers are indeed respected, but only as long as they keep within the prescribed limits of their role: they are only given voice in some specific questions and tasks related to the private sphere, such as maintaining the house and raising the children. The process of reevaluating mothers, along with these functions, is a long one.

Clara is able to find a link with her mother by experiencing motherhood as a physical experience, which infuses into her a renewed empathy toward her mother. As Clara's experience shows, when some girls become mothers, they reproduce the early relationship with their



own mothers (Chodorow qtd. in Brannon 114). In her case, this has very positive effects, which are not perceived in Helene's case.

The best example of an unmothered daughter in the corpus is Maureen from *them*. In the following paragraphs we shall closely analyze the relationship between Maureen and her mother Loretta and the influence it has over some of the girl's decisions and experiences.

Loretta's feelings for her oldest daughter are extremely volatile: at times she is nice and generous to her, but most often, she mocks Maureen's quiet personality, so opposed to her own carefree attitude. Perhaps the reason for their inability to understand each other lies precisely in their divergent personalities: Loretta leads an optimistic life full of changes that she promptly embraces, while Maureen is a serene, sensitive, passive and introverted child. She describes herself rather accurately as "a piece of wood being carried along in the water, drifting along, meeting things and passing by" (*them* 316). It will take her years to exert some agency over her life.

Maureen unsuccessfully waits for some peace to arrive. She wishes to find some space of her own, but she cannot fulfill this wish in her Family System of Origin, where she is forced to share everything: she sleeps in the same room as her sister Betty, and her mother even kicks her out of her own bed when she fights with her husband Furlong, forcing the girl to sleep in the sofa. Being expelled from her own bed is yet another symbol of Maureen's unstable and precarious life. Maureen spends her early adolescence constantly waiting for a change that can bring certainty and permanence to her life, but it does never arrive.

Loretta often teases Maureen by accusing her of leading a double life in which she secretly meets boys. This is not an innocuous allegation, and will have an influence upon Maureen's later decision of prostituting herself: with her taunts about men, as Oates affirms, "her mother is provoking her into promiscuous behavior" ("Correspondence" 53). However, Loretta is not always derisive toward Maureen. In fact, she tries to instill confidence into her daughters by advising them not to let anyone "push them around" (*them* 121). And so, even if Loretta does not have bad intentions when mocking her older daughter, she is simply not aware of how much this affects Maureen,

who ends up having the impression that her mother does not love her, and is deeply hurt by Loretta's mistrust which she interprets as hatred:

But why does she hate me? I don't hate her [j] I can't stand it! I don't know what to do. She always liked Jules better than me. It didn't matter how good I was. Then Jules left and she still likes him better, everybody does. Now she acts so strange but I didn't do anything, it's Betty who hangs around places and steals things. [...] Why does she say things about me, make up things? (*them* 178)

In general, Maureen is not jealous of her siblings (in fact, she dearly loves Jules), and in fact her previous complaints are based in actual facts, since Loretta treats her children quite differently. Maureen is probably wrong when she asserts that her mother hates her, but she has reasons to think so. According to Creighton and Binette, Maureen is consumed by fear and anxiety because she can never predict her mother's reactions. She ends up having a sense of fractured self due to the passive-aggressive attitude her mother adopts with her (443).

At the same time, Loretta is using her daughter to sexually lure Furlong and make him stay at home, an occurrence further explored in the next chapter, "Fathers." Oates describes Loretta's behavior as "quite unconscious," that is, as "a roundabout kind of seduction, all the more sinister in that the daughter cannot even accuse her mother of anything, or even think coherently about what is happening" ("Correspondence" 53). Therefore, probably neither the mother nor the daughter are totally aware of this.

As a consequence, Loretta is actually forcing her daughter to perform the role of a traditional mother/wife by forcing her to become the main caretaker of the family, and by using her sexuality to entice her husband into being at home more often, respectively. She is causing, or at least contributing to, a certain role confusion. We might argue, then, that Maureen feels unmothered because her mother is expecting her to assume some of her own role functions or expectations, while she avoids assuming them herself.

This situation eventually leads to violence. The first episode of violence between Maureen and Furlong takes place when Loretta gets

into Maureen's bed at half-past two in the morning, literally taking Maureen's place as the daughter, and ordering her to act as a wife (according to her understanding of this role) and prepare some coffee for Furlong. Since Furlong is drunk and insolent, Maureen loses her patience and insults him. He reacts by slapping her. Loretta, who is listening from the bedroom, does not intervene, something that deeply hurts Maureen.

Next morning, Loretta apologizes to her daughter, but only after stating that Maureen had "asked for trouble" herself (*them* 179). Possibly, Loretta chooses not to intervene, first, in order to physically protect herself; and second, in order to teach her daughter a patriarchal lesson: disrespecting men's authority may result in violence. She considers that Maureen has broken a gender rule, and that she should receive a punishment to learn her lesson. Thus, as Creighton and Binette explain, it is Loretta who initiates her daughter into a world where men are all-powerful and women are victims (443).

Maureen feels unquestionably betrayed by her mother, since not only has she taken advantage of her to convince Furlong to stay at home; she has also literally abandoned her at a time of physical danger. As a consequence, Maureen has been emotionally and physically damaged. This episode represents a turning point in Maureen's relationship with her mother, since the bond between them has been irreparably damaged. It also prompts the girl to take measures in order to be able to abandon her life at home, and most possibly has a definite effect on her renunciation of family bonds at the end of the novel.

Maureen feels increasingly trapped by her environment and her class (embodied by the "them" of the title) and considers that the only means of escaping is earning money. This belief is reinforced by a dream about her biological father, in which he

was sitting at a kitchen table in a room without walls, reading a newspaper. His eyes were vacant and alarmed at the headlines. Maureen came over to see what he was reading, but there was nothing there—they didn't know the secret, she and her father, to what was in the newspaper. But money was behind it all, surely. Money was the secret. (*them* 181)

Oates explains the meaning of this:

I meant Maureen's dream to have symbolic meanings far beyond her own personal condition. Dreaming of "money" would mean any number of things to a girl in her situation: for it seems the key, the very forbidden secret, the way out of a deathly predicament. ("Correspondence" 53)

Besides, Maureen's beloved brother Jules, who serves her as a role model, is at this point living on his own and earning money. It is no coincidence that Maureen associates men with money, since they have been traditionally ascribed to the public sphere and the business field. Besides, in Oates's words, Maureen's integrity as an individual

is being completely violated by her mother's attempt to "use" her, and she sees no way out except—naively—the way her brother seems to have gone, by acquiring money, somehow, anyhow, as if "money" were the key to freedom... which of course it is, at least in part. ("Correspondence" 53)

For this reason, Maureen decides to get a job, but her mother does not grant her permission, asserting that she is needed at home, which is probably another unconscious attempt to keep Furlong close to the house by using her daughter. Desperate to obtain money, Maureen decides to prostitute herself when the occasion arises: a man unexpectedly proposes it to her, and Maureen accepts. Once more, Maureen proves to be rather passive, for becoming a prostitute is not initially her idea: she is simply accepting the course of events.

In any case, it appears that she has finally surrendered to her mother's mockery and has acquired the secret life she was accused of leading. She is following the path that her mother has envisioned for her, although ironically, Loretta did not really wish Maureen to walk it. This decision will have an impact in her future life:

Maureen will associate sexual contact only with money, with getting something from someone else, so she is doomed (at least for a long time) to be frigid in her

relationships with men, even with her husband, whom she seems to love. Her normal love-impulses or sexual impulses are completely blocked. Not only does that seem to me valid in terms of a girl's character, but it must be seen in a symbolic sense as a symptom of illness in a "competitive culture." For we are instructed in various ways that the highest ideal of life is to achieve economic superiority—and if we want that ideal, we must compete furiously with others who seem to want it also. We can't be friendly, we can't admit a natural brotherly love. [...] What is unfortunate about the people in *them*, and poor people generally, is that they never do learn the obvious lessons the affluent learn—that money might mean freedom of one kind or another, but certainly doesn't guarantee happiness. (Oates "Correspondence" 53-54)

Maureen certainly faces her first sexual experience by showing no emotion whatsoever, not only because for her it is an economic transaction, but also because she is given to passivity, as Oates has confirmed (Oates "Interview. a" *Conversations with Joyce* 8). Therefore, she barely pays attention to these men, comparing the sexual relationship to a machine from a laundromat, with certain cycles that the men follow.

Johnson provides an additional reason why Maureen prostitutes herself: to rebel against her role as the "good girl," because she knows that this role has caused her victimization (*Understanding* 78). And besides, it is also a way to get revenge on her mother by doing the activity she accuses her of doing, by proving that Loretta was somewhat right in her accusations. Once again, determinism arises as a challenge that several Oatesian characters have to face and try to overcome. In *Garden, Swan*, overwhelmed by the conflicting demands of his parents, is unable to take charge of his own life, with tragic results. *them* is a satire on naturalism in which the characters try to fight against the uncontrollable forces that they encounter in the form of their family and their slum violent environment. In this case, Maureen does indeed succumb to her mother's predictions, but she is finally able, to a certain extent, to overcome her influence and create her own destiny.

When Furlong discovers the money that Maureen has been hiding, which confirms his suspicions that she has been prostituting herself, he physically assaults her. This is one of the violent climaxes of the novel, and represents a breaking point for Maureen. This episode shall be fully analyzed in the chapter “Fathers.”

Loretta’s attitude radically changes after Furlong’s beating of Maureen: she becomes affectionate and supportive of her daughter and takes care of her at home, refusing to commit her to an institution. Her response is opposed to the detached one she had during Furlong’s first attack on Maureen: at that time, she gave preference to the transmission of patriarchal gender rules; but now, seeing her daughter seriously hurt moves her to take action and protect her. Her love for her daughter reemerges in the face of violence.

In this manner, Loretta adopts a nurturing attitude again after her previously unmothering approach has failed to protect her daughter. However, Maureen has been too emotionally hurt by her and does not return this new closeness: after she recovers, she is rather detached toward her mother; and their relationship does not become closer.

Unlike other women who feel unmothered, Maureen’s difficulties with Loretta are not translated into the adoption of a mothering attitude to others, not even men, for whom she feels a certain revulsion mainly derived from her period working as a prostitute. She does not look for a compensating relationship, she simply rejects her mother’s personality and resolves not to resemble her. This rejection could be labelled as “matrophobia,” a term coined by the poet Lynn Sukenick to refer to women’s fear of becoming their mothers (qtd. in Rich 235). According to Rich, it is sometimes easier to hate and reject one’s own mother than to see the forces exerting pressure over her and forcing her to act in a manner that her daughter does not approve of (235). As Cigarini remarks, the hate of daughters for mothers is considered an essential step to become an adult within a patriarchal and Freudian framework; but actually, most women, even those who actually hate their mothers, want to genealogically relate to their mothers as a way of mediating their own presence in the world (40).

Indeed, even in cases of deep matrophobia, Rich continues, there is always a pull toward the mother: an adolescent girl may continuously

fight with her mother and yet borrow her clothes and perfume; or have housekeeping habits that mirror her mother's in a negative way because she wishes to remove herself from her mother's orbit. Matrophobia may be perceived as a womanly splitting of the self in a desire to be freed from the mother's bondage and become individuated. The mother stands for the victim in women, the unfree woman. Women's personalities may become blurred and overlapped with their mothers' personalities, and in order to know the boundaries between one another, the daughters radically disentangle themselves from their mothers (235-236). In *them*, Maureen considers that

[s]he couldn't be like her mother, always ready for the next day, always curious, cheerful, even in her complaints anxious to see what was going to happen next—she couldn't be like Loretta, ready to begin all over again. [...] She was not her mother's daughter. She felt an almost physical revulsion for that kind of woman, Loretta's kind, their hair in curlers and the monkeyish faces set for a good laugh. (*them* 388)

In this case, Maureen is fairly aware of the pressures that her mother endures. Her rejection is based on the fact that their personalities totally differ: while Loretta is able to adapt and even embraces change and transformation, Maureen only wants to achieve some permanence.

However, Maureen is more similar to her mother than she is aware of: when she decides to marry her already married teacher Jim Randolph, his wife visits her and they have an unpleasant argument in which Maureen coolly informs her that she will marry him no matter what. Maureen has, to her surprise, the strength to act self-assuredly instead of shily. This new resoluteness resembles that of her mother, so ironically, Maureen is benefiting from her mother's personality, which she had previously rejected as an undesirable trait. This proves Cigarini's assertion that even women who have conflictive relationships with their mothers wish to have a bond to them. In this case, Maureen is unconsciously praising her mother by imitating her.

Although Maureen's resolute attitude somehow recalls that of her mother, and although Loretta is somewhat amused to learn about the

incident, she slaps Maureen, affirming that she is “just a whore. She set out to be one and she succeeded” (*them* 417). Loretta is here reflecting the patriarchal perception of women as seductress, and as the “guilty” ones in cases of adulteries. Besides, the novel also suggests Loretta’s adherence to the classical dichotomic life choices for women of becoming either angels or prostitutes.

In the end, thus, despite Loretta’s change of attitude, there is not a recovery of the mother-daughter bond. Loretta appears to have assumed the expectations of the traditional nuclear traditional family, and this results in the distortion of the mother-daughter subsystem, because she does not give Maureen the possibility of becoming liberated, and because she forces her to be her substitute in her traditional role as mother/wife, which exposes the girl to violence.

#### 3.6.1.3 The Opposite of Deserting. Overprotecting Mothers: Lucille

The corpus shows that it is not easy for daughters to separate from their mothers in a healthy or balanced manner. In *Bird*, Krista’s father Edward is suspected of having murdered his lover Zoe. His wife Lucille considers that Edward’s behavior on the night of the crime is suspicious, but she does not think that he is a murderer. However, she does consider him guilty of infidelity and especially resents the “shame” that he has brought to the family. She feels hurt because she realizes that she had not really known her husband. It is not easy for Lucille to get used to her new situation because part of the

sense of loss due to a partners’ unfaithfulness is because of all that we have committed to our partner. [...] Relationships are both reality and illusion; they include what we have, what we believe we have and what we hope we have. (Boekhout et al. 360)

After Lucille is faced to confront the real status of her marriage, she separates from Edward. When her husband starts to behave threateningly by stalking them, he receives an order of restraint. Being now the custodial parent, Lucille is forced to explain the complicated events to the children: at times, she reacts by being obscure and refusing



to discuss matters, although in general she does not withhold information from the children and tries to be objective about the events.

Lucille, who suddenly finds herself alone with the responsibilities of parenthood, has always questioned her own authority over the children, and these doubts increase after she becomes the only custodial parent: she is aware of the vulnerability of her authority, so that “to the most casual of demands she brought a mysterious demand that seemed never to be fully satisfied” (*Bird* 9). In Krista’s words, these demands become “insatiable” after the separation (*Bird* 9). The wish to protect the children is possibly at the core of Lucille’s demands, but her daughter resents these exigencies, which she deems unreasonable.

Another problem is that Lucille considers that her marriage is finished, but Krista is closely attached to her father and still needs him (as discussed in the chapter “Fathers”), and this causes an irreparable schism in their approach to their new life. Lucille is worried about Krista’s safety and becomes rather protective of her: she knows that her husband has become desperate, unpredictable and resentful, and as a consequence may not make very good decisions regarding Krista’s safety. Therefore, Lucille tries to control Krista’s whereabouts and to prevent her from seeing Edward; while the girl, feeling that she is being treated like a little child, highly resents this and secretly meets her father. The relationship between mother and daughter is strained as a result of this, for their opinions are irreconcilable. As a result, when Lucille tries to find comfort in her children, Krista plainly rejects her. Ben, on the contrary, sympathizes with her: “he hated our father for how our father had hurt our mother, thus had to love our mother blindly, without judgment and without nuance” (*Bird* 21).

Krista stands in a difficult position too because she is trapped in the middle of her parents’ disagreements. Despite the fact that she “sides” with her beloved father, Krista oscillates between defying her mother and not wishing to worry or disappoint her. Krista understands the hurt that her mother Lucille feels, but still she feels a stronger alliance with her father than with her. This is caused by her predilection for him; but may also be partly influenced by the alert and overprotective attitude of her mother toward her, which Krista compensates by preferring her

father's unpredictability and spontaneity, despite realizing as well that his attitude may be reckless and even dangerous.

In the end, despite her suffering, Lucille manages to accept the events and overcome her grief. Her philosophy is that the past is over: "We need to put this behind us [...] This ugliness. Like an earthquake, or a flood, you're in shock but then, you know, you *galvanize*" (*Bird* 21, emphasis in the original). This quotation shows that Lucille is able to leave the past behind because she has come to terms with it not by ignoring it, but by confronting it and having learnt from it. The galvanizing image is especially significant since it implies the protection and strength one gets through learning from experience.

The overcoming of this trauma is not so easy for Krista, who clings to the past and to the loss of her father. She loves her mother, and is grateful for her affection, but there are huge differences in their approach to life: for instance, Lucille shows some racist traits that Krista dislikes and reproaches. Krista is a teenager who needs to find her own independent voice, and get rid of the constraints that have chained her mother in her gender and race prejudices.

### 3.6.2 Mother-Son Relationships

One of the most salient traits of the mother-son relationships in the corpus is the sons' wish to possess and control their mothers. Simultaneously, mothers also exhibit some possessive inclinations toward their sons. *Garden* and *Expensive* are the perfect example of this, as we shall prove by comparing them. Besides, the complex family relationships of these novels give origin to a particular kind of Oedipal bond which we shall explore.

#### 3.6.2.1 *Expensive People*: Description and Origin of the Conflict in the Mother-Son Subsystem

In *Expensive*, the mother-son relationship is a consequence of the previously described approach that Nada has to her self: she cannot reduce her identity to the role of mother, and consequently, she needs to flee from an exclusive commitment to this role by periodically abandoning her family, while at the same time she represses her artistic individuality because she considers it detrimental for her

socioeconomic status. Besides, she has created a fake socialite role that is neither satisfactory to her, and to which she subordinates the other facets of her identity, that is, motherhood and her profession.

As Boesenberg notices, Nada performs what she considers her maternal duties in a perfunctory manner, without committing herself emotionally (383). In a reveling dialogue, she tells Richard:

I don't particularly care to be called "Mother" by anyone. I don't respond to it. I'm trying to hold my own and that's it. No "Mother," no "Son." No depending on anyone else. [...] You're not going to blame me for anything. (*Expensive* 174)

The quotation proves that Nada plainly rejects the adherence to the demands of Hays's intensive mothering and does not want to make her son the sole center of her existence, as Richard would like her to do. In fact, the ideology of intensive mothering makes women responsible for the future actions of their children, even if there are other people taking care of the child such as fathers or babysitters (Hays 169); but Nada explicitly refuses to be held responsible for Richard's future actions. Despite commonly ignoring him, Nada can also be extremely demanding of his son. The most noticeable example of this is seen in the incident of Richard's I.Q. test, which he takes as part of his entrance test for his new school. Nada expects excellent results from him, and this causes a feeling of anxiety in Richard: "If I failed the exam I would lose [her] forever" (*Expensive* 39).

Upon learning that his I.Q. score is lower than hers, Nada forces Richard to take the test again: "I don't want you to be less than I am. I want you to be better than I am. I can't bear the thought of some kind of degenerative process setting in. I see myself as less than my father was, and now you]" (*Expensive* 59). As Daly perceives, Nada raises his son to be a competitive man, like his father (33). She wants both to help Richard to turn into a competitive member of the capitalist system they belong to, and to validate her own position in the community by having a son she can publicly be proud of. This accounts for Nada's wish to dedicate herself to her public image; in this case, she is trying to gain social approval by proving that as a socialite mother, she has

encouraged her son to develop his capacities to the maximum. Besides, the quotation reveals that Nada lacks self-esteem to a certain extent, which is not a surprising revelation when considering that her denial of her writing job, apart from aiming at her fitting into her social class, is also indicative of her lack of self-confidence.

Richard complies and takes the test again, but when he breaks into the school's record room and learns that the results of both tests were positive (he scores 153 and 161), he becomes furious: "What more could she want? I couldn't do any better. I had even pushed myself beyond what I could do, and still it wasn't enough for her—I wasn't enough for her— and what else could I do?" (*Expensive* 99). He senses that his mother will never be proud of him, and destroys the room in a fit of rage. He possibly feels that the burden of Nada's demands is not compensated by the steady emotional support that he craves for. Johnson describes the episode as a characteristic Oatesian violent climax caused by Richard's lack of emotional nurturance and the victimization by the false values of the suburbs (*Understanding* 60). Alternatively, Waller proposes that Richard destroys the room as an attempt to prove his own autonomy against his mother's will (*Dreaming* 121).

According to Friedman, Richard is a good example of the use that Oates makes of children or adolescents as dual symbols of human idealism, and emblems of human impotence and limitations, who are powerless to realize their dreams (*Joyce* 67). In this novel, Richard fails in his attempt to transform Nada to his liking or to tie her to him.

The mother-son conflict can be visualized as a string that Richard pulls in order to tie Nada to him, and from which she tries to break free. This irony is perceived by Richard: "I loved her more than ever, of course. Mothers who cringe and beg for love get nothing, and they deserve nothing, but mothers like Nada who are always backing out of the driveway draw every drop of love out of us" (*Expensive* 165). This affirmation reminds us of Mrs. Pedersen desperately pursuing her biological children's love but being harshly rejected by them. Thus, Richard would rather have a rigid mother-son subsystem with solid boundaries, whereas Nada would be inclined to have an open subsystem which promotes the sincere self-expression of its members and a

disposition to solve possible differences. This open subsystem would keep the boundaries between the family and the outside world permeable, which would allow her to avoid assuming a single role as a full-time mother/wife.

Moreover, since Richard only wants to consider Nada as his mother, he is unable to perceive her as a woman in control of her sexuality and her sexual desire. The boy suspects that his mother has extramarital affairs, and appears to be horrified about the perspective of his mother having, or satisfying, some sort of sexual desire, a wish that according to Irigaray (51) has been denied to mothers: they are expected to satisfy others (in this case, Richard's demands as a son) and not themselves. Upon one occasion, Richard tries to manipulate Nada by sending her an anonymous note proclaiming that one of her supposed lovers is a thief. Richard justifies his controlling actions by claiming to wish to protect his mother and help her maintain her social position because the man of the note he wrote is not well-liked among the community; but even if this were his actual intention, his strategy is devious: the line between protecting and dominating appears to be rather thin for him.

In Paterna and Martínez's opinion, mothers have been fitted into an asexual model, devoid of all wish and forced to devote to their children. Every woman must only be available to one man and inaccessible to the rest. This negative perception of female sexuality and bodily experiences is transmitted by mothers themselves, who transmit their fears and doubts to their children: they become the mediators of sexual prohibition. Love is the only experience that justifies the practice of sexuality. Femininity is confirmed by the condition of being loved and wanted, a fantasy that is achieved by idealizing men and assuming that they will fulfill their expectations. The faithfulness and submission to the needs of men is a confirmation of women's and men's assigned roles. Simultaneously, the fear of an unwanted pregnancy has been used as a deterrence for the exertion of desire. This fear has been defeated by the development of contraception (143-145). As they conclude,

[l]a identidad femenina debe liberarse del ideal tradicional definido y escapar de la trampa que retiene a las mujeres

entre sus deseos maternos, insatisfechos en la mayoría de las ocasiones, y las necesidades de los hijos que no admiten de la madre otra identidad que no sea la propiamente materna. (Paterna and Martínez 145)

This is precisely what Nada is trying to do in the novel.

The discord of the mother-son subsystem is reflected in the rather complicated manner in which Nada is addressed in the novel: she tells her son to call her “Nadia” (the shortened form of Natashya), but he ends up calling her by his own version of her name, “Nada.”

On the one hand, Nada’s preference for “Nadia” instead of other common forms of address such as “mom” or “mommy” symbolizes not only her mistrust towards motherhood, but also the pull toward individuality and uniqueness which she cannot fully conceal or erase behind the fictional role she performs as a perfect socialite.

On the other hand, Richard, who yearns to have an ideal mother, does only on very rare occasions call her “mother,” and never says “mom.” Upon most occasions, he calls her “Nada,” the only form of the name that he was able to pronounce as a child.<sup>24</sup> Somehow this suggests Richard’s disapproval of his mother. Since she is not the traditional mother he yearns for, Richard refuses to recognize her as anything at all: “Nada” is the Spanish word “nothing.” In other words, if she is not a traditional mother, she turns into nothing for him.

As Richard grows older, his mother plainly opposes his calling her “Nada,” arguing that it is a foolish name. Nada is possibly disturbed and displeased with the implications of the name, because it underlines the shallowness of her role as an upper middle-class socialite. Richard concedes that “Nada” is a “stupid nickname” (*Expensive* 165), but will continue to use it even after she dies, which proves his lasting resentment over her refusal to be a traditional mother.

Nada cannot (and does not wish to) be a traditional mother due to two main reasons: her yearn for independence and her literary creative capacity. So Richard strongly resents these two factors.

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<sup>24</sup> There is an alternative account of the origin of this nickname. Richard asserts that his mother taught him to call her “Nada” as a child, but he appears to be misremembering, because his mother never approves of this nickname. Thus, it is more plausible to assume that she told him to call her “Nadia” and he came up with “Nada” instead.

Nada's search for independence is translated into her periodical abandonments of her family, which take place when Richard is six, nine, and eleven years old. Richard asserts that on the third occasion she is accompanied by a lover; but this is not exactly proved to be true. The abandonments may be interpreted in two main manners (which contribute to the destruction of Richard's maternal ideal): as a legitimate search for identity and individuality; and as an excessive and for this reason destructive individualistic tendency that distances her from her real identity as a mother and a writer.

The first interpretation perceives her search as a valid attempt to develop her identity and fulfill herself in a manner that she cannot attain otherwise because she has subordinated both her motherly experience and her literary career to her position as a socialite. Creighton considers that it is precisely during these periods of absence when the "real" Nada appears: the bohemian free spirit, the intelligent, sensual, and gifted woman (*Joyce* 61). The second view suggests that Nada possesses an excess of ego and individualism which becomes destructive not only for herself but also for others because it prevents her from enjoying her real identity as a mother and writer. This interpretation contemplates Nada as being as hollow and vain as her environment, and is related to her excessive eating habits which suggest her greed and voracity.

In any case, we may claim that Nada is indeed a complex woman, even if she does not always let it show. In fact, she flees from her house repeatedly with the objective of filling her internal void, but as Boesenberg (380) suggests, she returns due to her attachment to an affluent lifestyle: she considers that "[a] world like this is shit without money" (*Expensive* 207). Ironically, every time Nada abandons her family, she is fleeing from an inner emptiness caused by the superficiality of her affluent life and her phony role, only to willingly return to it soon afterward, because she cannot stand living without material luxury.

Both Nada's husband and son resent Nada's decision to leave because they cannot understand her motivations, since they only consider the question from their own point of view and disregard Nada's perspective: for them, her decision is a betrayal, as well as a

clear neglect of her responsibilities toward them as an institutional mother.

In a crucial conversation, Nada tries to explain to Richard her need for freedom:

“There are certain times in a person’s life,” Nada began, [...] “when one simply has to shake himself free. [...] everyone must free himself of impossible pressures, of restraints and burdens that suffocate him.”

“If you leave this time, don’t bother coming back,” I said.

“There is nothing personal, never anything personal in freedom,” Nada went on, maybe not hearing me or not caring, “freedom is just a condition one has to achieve. It isn’t a new place or a new way of living. It’s just a condition like the air that surrounds the earth.” (*Expensive* 84-85)

None of them totally understands or wishes to comply to the other’s point of view. Their misunderstanding reflects their opposing goals and lack of empathy. First, Richard cannot empathize with Nada’s determination to be independent, which he interprets as a kind of betrayal. The second motive that prevents Nada from being a traditional mother is her approach to her career, which we have explained in the section “Work for Self-Realization: Zoe’s And Nada’s Artistic Inclinations. Creativity and Procreativity,” where we also pointed out Richard’s resentment for Nada’s literary creative skill, which has two main consequences. The first one is Richard’s conviction of his having turned into a secondary character (that is, a literary creation) for his mother instead of her son (the result of procreation). This attitude reflects once more Richard’s inability to conceive that Nada can assume both roles (literary author and mother) simultaneously. Second, Richard’s resentment for Nada’s career is manifested in his attempt to reverse his position by becoming the author/creator of his own literary character, while reducing his mother to the status of a created character in his narrative. This implies not only a confusion between fiction and reality, but also a role reversal which is manifested in his resolve to control his parents: he adopts the role of a monitoring parent while



dodging the supposed obedience of a child toward his parents. Richard exerts, thus, a double reversal: first a creative reversal by which he tries to transform himself from character into author, but then by doing so he is at the same time trying to become the author of his mother as a character, which implies a procreative reversal that transforms him from created son to creative parent.

Richard, then, frequently spies on his parents, specially his mother: as he asserts, this is his “life’s work” (*Expensive* 33): on one occasion he even phones home while he is at school to try to find out if his mother has gone out. Richard admits this reversal: “I liked to think that I possessed my parents. I had them. I seemed to be leading them as if on a leash [...] I had the dreamy illusion that they belonged to me at this times, Nada and Father” (*Expensive* 17). One of the ironies of the novel is that Richard spends most of his time spying his parents, but he does not actually know them. Nada is a mystery to him, as he constantly declares, and he does not know his father much better, since he is often away from home working, and he is not actually very interested in him.

Nada’s reaction to Richard’s attitude is recriminating him for his espionage and trying to break free. Richard, on his part, keeps on trying to monitor her movements and to create her as a character in his fantastic narrative, with little success. He even goes to the extreme of fantasizing having murdered her by taking one of her short stories as an inspiration. After she dies, he starts to write his memoir to try to make sense of Nada’s deceptive figure, which proves to be truly complicated, because he is trying to possess a person he never really knew. Besides, by writing the memoir, Richard is still trying to reduce her to a character that he can model to his liking.

Despite their divergent views, Johnson points out the existence of similitudes between Richard and Nada. First, to a certain extent Richard has unconsciously accepted Nada’s values, and like her, he vents his emotions into writing. Besides, mother and son transform early emotional insecurity into a need for power that will replace the need for love: Nada tries to use material possessions and social standing to fill her void, while Richard must possess Nada herself (murdering her, whether in fantasy or reality), and finally write his memoir (*Understanding* 31-62).

### 3.6.2.1.1 Food and Money as Metaphors

Apart from the possessive bonds and the distortion between fiction and reality, Richard and Nada's relationship is also mediated by two central metaphors in the book: food and money.

Excessive food consumption is common for Oatesian characters who attempt to compensate for their emotional and spiritual privations. In this case, as Johnson comments, Richard clings to Nada even after her death, and tries to abate this craving by consuming food (*Understanding* 64). His excessive eating, Creighton explains, is a regression to an infantile mode, and works as a substitute for what he feels as the lack of maternal nurturance (*Joyce* 62). According to Johnson, his gluttony symbolizes an oral fixation upon his depriving and now dead mother and presumably provides him with enough illusory sustenance to finish the memoir (*Understanding* 64).

But food does not bring any consolation to Richard, who, feeling both physically and emotionally hollow, chooses to take his gluttony to its last consequences and kill himself by overeating. Boesenberg (386) emphasizes that indeed, Richard overeats as a substitute for emotional nourishment; but at the same time, the consumption of excessive food proves also that superabundance can be lethal. We have also seen the nefarious effects of an excess of food/emotional nourishment in the case of Mrs. Pedersen and her family in *Wonderland*. In *Expensive*, Richard compensates his lack of requited love for his mother by a mortal ingestion of food.

As Friedman notices, *Expensive's* main metaphor is gluttony, which stands for excessive material acquisition as well as an inflated sense of self that leads to a denial of the world; and in Nada's case, a denial of her son (*Joyce* 7). This is related to the second interpretation for Nada's abandonments, the one that perceives her search for independence as negative and motivated by extreme selfishness and individualism which in the end deform her identity even more, and totally disconnect her from others. Friedman's vision of Nada recalls that of the devouring and self-centered Dr. Pedersen and the destructive excesses of his ego.

In Oates's fiction, Friedman notices, gluttony, obesity and greed recurrently appear to describe the excesses of will and the excesses of

the isolated ego (*Joyce* 7). Oates considers that one of the most notable self-deceptions of human beings is our isolating individualism and disregard for others, which make us blind to their needs. In this case, Nada's greedy nature makes her place her social aspirations and craving for an individual self before other considerations.

Finally, Bender adds, eating is associated with literature by Richard: "You think food excites me, my readers? [j] Food means nothing but words mean everything!" (*Expensive* 164). Besides, the narrator allies himself with an entire school of literary gluttons: Juvenal, Sterne, Churchill (Bender 33). Richard defends his enjoyment of the pleasures of food, but also admits that it is only an incomplete solace compared to the power of words and literature. Thus, Richard resorts to writing as a form of fulfillment when food fails to satiate his hunger for meaning, thus once more linking literary creation to a biological process.

Food is also intimately associated with one of the main topics of the book, present from its very title: money. The title of the novel, *Expensive People*, points to the connection of the characters to material gain, and to its influence over their relations. The setting also reflects this pattern: the events take place in the wealthy suburbs of Detroit, which stand in acute contrast with the desolated slums of the same city that the Wendalls inhabit in *them*.

Money is thus essential in the suburban lifestyle in *Expensive*. It is present in most of the episodes of the book. Grant mentions the powerful metaphor of acquisition and consumption of the novel: the expensive people consume each other and cost each other dearly. In their world, everything has a price tag. The cost of living, for Richard, proves too high (possibly because he cannot confront his mother's death, or even come to terms with her true identity), and so he plans to kill himself from overeating (109), (an act that is a form of consumption in itself).

Consumption, then, links food and money, and this parallelism is explicit in the text, where material greed and gluttony are intertwined. Boesenberg points out that Richard acquires his inclination to greed from the adults that surround him; not only from his parents, but also from acquaintances like a friend of his mother who finds her husband's

money hidden in an ice container, an image that leads Richard to contemplate eating money. From Boesenber's perspective, if Richard plans to kill himself by overeating, it is because he cannot achieve the supreme gesture of eating money, since he does not have enough cash to do so (381-386).

Money is also symbolically present in the way that Nada eats: she ingests food copiously, and as if she expected someone to take the plate away from her. Richard describes her as hungry and greedy, which is an interesting combination of adjectives, for in this novel the two terms seem to be equivalent. As a young woman Nada was greedy for a good social position; and after she attains it, she craves for fulfilment, which she cannot find in her upper-class environment. The reason she never gets fat is that she is never totally satisfied.

Similarly, money is prominent in most of the interactions among characters, as both Boesenberg (378) and Johnson (*Understanding* 54) suggest. More specifically, Elwood and Natashya's marriage is heavily associated to wealth. Despite the couple's frequent disagreements and fights, Nada clings to her marriage in order to maintain her social position and comfortable life, while Elwood does so in order to show the beautiful Nada off as a symbol of dominance and wealth. Nada is obsessed with money: according to her son, ostentatious and expensive things seemed emanations of a higher existence for her. Nada is, then, "intoxicated [j] by the mystical sense of her being at last in power, in control, part of the secret, invisible world that owns and controls everything" (*Expensive* 50). Economic affluence is clearly associated here with a means of exerting control, an association that is also prevalent in *Garden* and *them*. Exerting control is also crucial for Richard: he wants to control his mother, while she wants to control her own life.

Money also features Richard and Nada's relationship. As Boesenberg argues, Richard wonders how "expensive" he is for his mother, and whether he has destroyed her career as a writer and locked her in an uncongenial marriage for which material affluence is a meager compensation. Boesenberg concludes that Richard exacts the highest price from his mother by killing her in the end (384). Although we shall soon contest the assumption that Richard is the killer, he claims to be

so, and consequently, he is convinced that he has cost his mother everything.

#### 3.6.2.1.2 *The Culmination of the Mother-Son Conflict*

The mother-son conflict crystallizes in two main occurrences that are the result of Richard's aversion for Nada's profession as a writer. First, after trying to confirm his relevance to Nada by trying to locate himself in her writings, Richard realizes that he is of so little importance to his mother that he seems to have become a secondary character. He then decides to come back into focus and turn from a character into an author by creating a fantasy in which he kills Nada.

Richard gradually realizes this displacement to a minor character. While searching through his mother's papers, he discovers a note about a domestic task to be done: "Inside of car cleaned—tell them about the chocolate R spilled" (*Expensive* 105). Richard suspects the capital letter "R" refers to him and is hurt to realize his little significance in her life: "Was 'R' me? Was I just 'R' to her? Or was that a sign of affection?" (*Expensive* 105). Richard desperately tries to find a prominent position in Nada's emotional life by assuming that the shortening of his name implies affection. Instead, it appears to be equating him to a minor character in the plot of her life. He has slipped out of focus. In Oates's words, Richard "is made to realize absolute impotence; inconsequence; despair" at this point (*Expensive. Confessions* 239).

Richard's reading of Nada's short story "The Molesters" proves his desperation to place himself at the center of Nada's existence. "The Molesters" adopts the perspective of an unnamed little girl who narrates the three episodes of sexual abuse that she suffers, which in the end are revealed as a single aggression. Richard offers his own numbered interpretation of the story's plot. These are his most significant conclusions:

3. The child, who is much like myself, is telling the story to herself in various stages, unable to allow herself the full memory at first. It is too terrible. She gradually works up to it, is finally flooded by it [...]. Clever Natashya

Romanov, the author, who becomes herself one of the poking, prying molesters!

4. In symbolic terms: the child is myself, Richard Everett. Nada wrote the story to exorcise the guilt she rightly felt for abandoning me so often.

5. Nada, in three forms, as three adults, recognizes herself as my molester and acknowledges her guilt. (*Expensive* 163)

Richard's analysis of the little girl's emotional state in number three is accurate; but his identification with the protagonist in number four comes across as a rather far-fetched hypothesis, and as a definite proof of his own narcissistic inclinations: placing himself into the protagonist's role accounts for his wish to be the epicenter of his mother's life. Simultaneously, this consideration denies his mother's potential for imagination: he automatically assumes that the plot is rooted upon "real life," when his conclusions are, of course, simply his own interpretation of real life.

Moreover, by means of this identification with the story's little girl, Richard places himself into the position of the victim, while his mother is placed in the position the "prying molester" that hurts him. This is somewhat ironic, because Richard is the one who is constantly spying on his parents and trying to dominate them. Friedman explains in detail how Richard comes to this association. For him, the story shows the three faces of Nada: each successive telling of the same event offers a more adult perspective which betrays the parental influence over the child. The parents interpret the experience and deform the innocent into the grotesque: what at the beginning seems an innocent encounter is turned into something malevolent. The true molesters are then the parents. And so, Richard sees his mother's three faces in the story: as the molester who subjects her innocent child to her perversion; as the mother who tells the child that it has been subjected to perversion; and as the father who is insensitive and impatient toward the child's pain (*Joyce* 68).

There are, nevertheless, some irrefutable links between Richard and the girl of "The Molesters," as Richard notices:

If the child-hero of the story cannot understand what has happened to her, how are the rest of us to know? [...] Can we trust our well-meaning memories, our feeble good natures, which want to remember only the best about our parents, which brush aside ugly thoughts? (*Expensive* 163-164)

In this reflection, Richard is clearly alluding to his memoir, in which he tries to make a faithful portrait of his mother, an almost impossible accomplishment, as he admits. At the same time, he is recognizing himself as an unreliable narrator; and subtly advising readers to be cautious about his assertions, which are, certainly, rather inconsistent at times.

Richard's comparison with the characters from "The Molesters" may also work as a justification for the violence he wishes to commit against his mother: since she has not treated him fairly, he feels entitled to punish her. Richard's punishment is exerted by trying to revert his position and transforming himself from a created, irrelevant and impotent secondary character into a controlling, resolute author. While determined to gain control over the relationship with his mother, Richard casually finds out Nada's outline for a short story entitled "The Sniper," he decides to act it out and become a sniper as well. In the plot, a boy secretly buys a gun and shoots at people, not killing anybody until the last episode.

As Daly asserts, Nada's journal entry merely considers the plot in aesthetic terms (35):

I can stretch this out to three episodes but no more, finej then the fourth, when you've been conditioned to the others, results in the murder: planned all along though maybe he didn't know it. (Too corny? Should he know it, or not?) The Sniper. "The Sniper." I'll think of a theme later. (*Expensive* 107)

Nada's character is described as a "young man [j] [who] leads two lives, one public and the other secret" (*Expensive* 106). Nada is

referring here to the double nature of the sniper, which is yet another instance of Oates's interest in doubles.

By fantasizing that he is a sniper, Richard creates a doppelgänger that infuses him with a feeling of control. He comes to consider that he is composed by two halves: his real, so-called "daytime self," an introverted and shy child who dreams of his mother paying more attention to him; and his "nighttime self," a powerful sniper who has enough cold blood to plan and carry out a revenge against his mother. As we shall see, the latter self is pure fantasy. Richard is convinced that his nighttime self would make Nada proud of him: "If only Nada could see me now and realize what I was—not that feeble, sickish daytime child of hers, but a darker, more secret child of hers, a boy who belonged only to her and dedicated everything to her" (*Expensive* 218).

This fantasy nighttime self is the one who, according to Richard, will eventually murder her; but as Daly explains, Richard's identity as a sniper gives him power because he can begin as a character, and, by killing Nada, become an author (35). Although, in fact, Richard does not really kill Nada, he is able to eventually regain some authorial control by momentarily turning into a writer like her. The drawback is that, despite acquiring the power to narrate (and deform) the events, he still has no possibility to alter them; and, as Daly notices, Richard is paradoxically trying to gain recognition by incarnating an individual that is never identified (35).

Richard asserts that he procures a deer rifle and starts a shooting spree; but as we shall see, there are several clues in the narrative that reveal the falseness of such assertions. Richard starts imitating the character from Nada's short story; but suddenly, the situation is complicated when a real sniper begins to randomly shoot at the neighbors. It is obvious, from the text, that Richard is not this anonymous man. Most possibly, he reads about the real sniper in the newspaper and fantasizes about being him by merging the newspaper headlines with his mother's story. In fact, he affirms that it takes him some time to realize that the sniper described in the newspaper is himself; that is, it takes him some time to create his fantasy and convince himself of its authenticity. This is an instance of how *Expensive* tends to blur imagined and actual events and of how the



distortion between person and character brings confusion to Richard. In other words, the layers of fiction and reality become even further blurred in the novel.

Interestingly, Waller explains that, in a sense, Richard is also part of Nada's fiction. Richard considers that Nada wants to manipulate him, and therefore, by destroying the record's room and later on writing the memoir, he tries to assert his own autonomy against her novelistic control. But the reality he tries to assert (such as sniping and eventually, murder) is just a series of fantasies (*Dreaming* 118, 221). Since his fantasy of murder is rooted on one of Nada's short stories, he is paradoxically trying to exert control over his mother by following Nada's plot. As Bender brilliantly notices, Richard's agony is the central irony of the novel: he is progressively reduced from artist-hero to a minor character, changing from the controlling narrator to a fictive personality in a work literally ghost-written (36).

#### 3.6.2.1.3 *Death, Sex and the Oedipus Complex in Expensive People*

The components of death and sex become an essential part of the mother-son bond, even if it is in a non-stated manner, as Rich notices. For her, the presence of death in the relation between mother and son is not an uncommon occurrence, perhaps because a boy's mother reminds him of his existence as a simple clot of flesh growing inside her body. Therefore, thinking about a time when he was nothing, he is forced to acknowledge a time when he will no longer exist. A son may fear (and long to) being lost again in a female body, being reincorporated to it and pulled back into a preconscious state. This is why sometimes penetrating a woman can be an act filled with anxiety, in which he must deny the living person and possess her body, and even so that body remains threatening to him. It seems that the mother looms in each woman for the grown-up boy: he must make a separation between the sexual woman and the motherly woman, and even so, romantic sexual love is closely associated with death. The denial of the anxiety toward the mother may adopt many forms: the need to perceive her as the Angel of the House, for instance (Rich 188-189).

We shall explore these possibilities in *Expensive* and *Garden* in the light of psychodynamic theories upon male development, which concede a great importance to early experiences in these processes, as well as to the unconscious; and which were examined by psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Nancy Chodorow and Ellyn Kaschak among others (Brannon 106, 111). These processes are central themes in both novels, openly recognized by Oates in the case of *Garden*, whose plot she has described as a sort of Freudian romance (“Interview. a” *Conversations with Joyce* 9). For our analysis, we shall focus on the interpretation that Kaschak makes of the Oedipal complex, because it offers a more suitable explanation for the characters’ situation.

Freud described the Oedipus complex as the desire of a boy to be sensually close to his mother, to identify with the father, and to gain his territory and power. According to Freud, this complex illustrates a formative stage in each individual’s psychosexual development when the young child transfers his love object from the breast to the mother. At this time, the child develops intense sexual feelings toward his mother which are biologically determined and create an anxiety in him that his jealous father will castrate him as a punishment. The ideal resolution of this conflict is for the boy to give up his mother and to internalize and identify with his father, whom he recognizes as superior in power. The father is then adopted as Super-ego (the ideal of perfection that the ego strives to emulate), which means that the boy acknowledges the supremacy of patriarchy, the discipline of the instincts, exogamy and the incest taboo (Wykes and Welsh 100, Felluga n. p., Rich 196-197).

Rich discusses the impact of the Oedipus complex in later psychological currents. The Oedipus complex has been the most widespread of Freud’s theories. Women who have never read Freud still believe that to show affection toward their sons is to be “seductive,” or that to influence them against forms of masculine behavior is to castrate them, or to become a domineering creature that their sons will have to reject in order to grow up, or to prompt them to be homosexual. Although Freud was a pioneer in many aspects, Rich reminds us that he was terribly limited by the gender expectations of the dominant

ideology of his time. The general assumption at work here is that the two-person mother-child relationship is naturally regressive, circular and unproductive, and that culture and civilization depend on father-son relationships. Karen Horney accepted the Oedipus complex, but unlike Freud, she did not consider it universal but just the result of specific situations experienced by some children (Rich 196-198, 200, 202).

Approaching psychodynamics from a feminist perspective, Ellyn Kaschak concedes that Freud's Oedipus complex was adequate to explain male personality development, but she draws different conclusions to it in her "Oedipal phase." She disagrees with Freud's approach to female personality development and proposes a counterpart, the "Antigone phase," as we shall explain in the chapter "Fathers." In contrast with Freud, Kaschak asserts that when men solve their Oedipal phase, they adopt a non-patriarchal attitude: they see women as independent instead of as possessions; and themselves as individuals who act within boundaries instead of kings. Gaining power is not a major goal for them. However, Kaschak argues that both the Oedipal and the Antigone phases are commonly never solved, because the social structures often perpetuate differences in power and in roles (qtd. in Brannon 114-116).

According to Kaschak, an unsolved Oedipus complex in men results in a patriarchal attitude: they treat women as an extension of themselves and not as independent beings, expecting servitude from them. Besides, they are sexually self-centered. With this sense of entitlement, men tend to seek power in a self-centered manner that may be destructive to others, such as incest and rape (qtd. in Brannon 115). Michael Johnson, who studied family violence, coined the term "patriarchal terrorism" to refer to the systematic violence that men engage in at home because they feel they have the right to do so (qtd. in Brannon 115).

In *Expensive*, Richard feels anxiety towards sex, but this may be due to the ignorance and inexperience of his young age: he experiences episodes of jealousy for his mother's sexual life (particularly perceived in his ponderings about her supposed lovers), which may contribute to his distress toward sex. In fact, Richard seems to adopt one of the outlets

proposed by Adrienne Rich and wishes to perceive his mother as the Angel of the House, since by doing this, he might be able to claim her as a son. But this wish becomes problematic due to Nada's dedication to social rather than family life.

In the end, Richard resorts to violence as an extreme "solution," as well as a punishment for what he perceives to be a transgression: Nada's abandonment of him and her rejection of domestic life. Sex, death, and possession become intermingled in an almost undistinguishable fashion, and provoke in Richard simultaneous feelings of love and hatred, worship and aggression toward his mother. In fact, his adoration for Nada can be described as brutal, since he refers to this as "the very violence of the love we feel" (*Expensive* 165).

Along with this mixture of sex and death, *Expensive* clearly features a sort of Oedipus complex. According to Creighton, Richard is trying to make the Oedipal relationship last forever (*Joyce* 62). In fact, the most distinctive trait of this triangle is the minor role that the father plays in the complex, from which he virtually disappears. The classical resolution of the Oedipus complex, the murder of the father, seems to be turned into matricide in *Expensive*, according to its narrator; but except for Ellen G. Friedman and Eva Boesenberg, most critics agree that Richard has not literally killed his mother: hers was an unidentified killer, and Richard simply tries to be recognized as her murderer. There are several clues that support this interpretation.

Firstly, Richard is a self-declared unreliable narrator. In the initial paragraphs, he asserts that the novel is not a confession: it may be inferred, then, that he is not confessing his mother's murder because he has not really killed her. He is just confessing his distorted assessment of reality. The focalization of the novel is highly significant because there is only one perspective: Richard's. Nada, the character around whom the text revolves, is not given a voice in the narrative. Except for a few dialogues, she is exclusively portrayed through the perspective of her son, which is undeniably blurred, as he himself admits: "It's possible that I'm lying without knowing it. Or telling the truth in some weird, symbolic way without knowing it" (*Expensive* 5).

In another passage, Richard asserts that he is honest and that eventually the truth will be told; but as Johnson remarks, the idea that

truth can be defined or even put into words is repeatedly challenged through the novel (*Understanding* 53). Richard confesses his own inability to distinguish life from fiction, and partly blames Nada for it. Creighton also emphasizes Richard's inclination towards fantasy by posing two examples. First, he often fictionalizes himself for his parents by making out stories about his schoolmates (*Joyce* 51, 56-57). This habit is part of Richard's manipulative nature, and his attempt to become an author by reimagining the world around himself: he asserts that the fictional classmates are extensions of himself; and their parents, of his own parents. He says that he makes everything up "out of a peculiar distrust of the truth" (*Expensive* 64). In the novel, the confusion between reality and fiction is common. This leads Richard to conclude that the very experience of attempting to portray what is a "real" experience falsifies it (*Creighton Joyce* 56).

The second aspect that suggests that Richard is not the killer is the unclear and implausible timeline of the events that he offers: the school attendance reports place him at school at the time when he is supposedly killing Nada. Richard himself admits that readers will be confused about the timing, and pleads that his subsequent stay at hospital made him lost track of time.

Thirdly, there are some blatant incoherencies in Richard's account: for example, he cannot find the rifle in the place where he buried it, and subsequently argues that it has been stolen or removed. Most significantly, Richard reads in the newspaper about one shooting that he admits he has not committed (it was actually committed by the real sniper). At first, Richard is troubled by this interference of reality with his fantasy of being a sniper, but he soon reinterprets it as the action of a second sniper who follows his lead. Thus, while the media refer to the real and only sniper, Richard alters this narrative to protect his fantasy from crumbling, while at the same time he empowers himself by asserting that he is being imitated and that he is much more sophisticated than the other shooter. Nada's killer is never discovered; and this enables Richard to insist it was him.

Fourthly, other characters, including the narrator's father, do not believe him: Richard's psychiatrist, Dr. Saskatoon, bluntly tells him that it was a hallucination. By coolly rationalizing his confession and

diagnosing an Oedipal delusion, Bender adds, the therapist is frustrating the boy's rage for order and retribution (32); that is, he is destroying his fantasy of empowerment and his need to make sense of his mother's death. Therefore, Daly concludes, Richard writes the confession because he is not believed (33).

Even if Richard has not killed Nada, the narrator's conflicts are real; and therefore, his motivations should be analyzed. We need to notice that Elwood is mostly absent from the Oedipus complex: Richard does not appear to consider him a real rival, because he suspects that his parents do not really love each other; and he also feels that Elwood is unworthy of Nada.

First, as Dr. Saskatoon plausibly argues, Richard is trying to perpetuate his anguished Oedipal bond with Nada by asserting to have murdered her, hence trying to be the most expensive part of her existence: the one she has paid for with her very life. Richard wants to regain the focus of the narrative and to become visible; but this does not completely work as he expected, for nobody believes that he has murdered Nada, and this comes as a new disappointment for him. Richard does not solve his Oedipal complex, which from Kaschak's perspective means that the subject adopts a patriarchal attitude and treats women as an extension of himself instead of independent people, expecting submission from them. This has been Richard's position for most of the novel.

There are other works by Oates which present similar mother-son conflicts. According to Creighton, the most outstanding is perhaps *Angel of Light*,<sup>25</sup> where Owen's killing of his mother by setting a bomb that also kills him is also a way to fix mother and son forever in an Oedipal bond that recalls Richard Everett's supposed killing of his mother. *Angel* is yet another instance of Oates claustrophobic and obsessive family romance, in which matricide becomes a regressive longing for oneness with the mother (*Novels Middle* 31, 34).

In *Expensive*, the desire for gaining centrality is closely linked to Richard's wish to gain some sense of power and control. Once more, we can consider this yearn in terms of Kaschak's unsolved Oedipus complex: she argues that these men tend to search for power in

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<sup>25</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Angel*.

destructive manners, as Richard does by “killing” Nada. His claim upon her becomes so immense that he fantasizes to have claimed her very life because he feels entitled to do so. According to Bender, the novel offers a variation of a Dostoevskian theme: the individual search for power, even for criminal authority, a self-designed, gratuitous source of meaning in a world where traditional value systems are defunct (32).

It is somewhat ironical that Richard perpetuates the bond to his mother by killing her and then deciding to kill himself; but as Oates explains,

What is an assassination but a gesture of political impotence? What are most “crimes of passion” except gestures of self-destruction, self-annihilation? [j] A desperate act of (premeditated) matricide will not restore his soul to him but will at least remove the living object of his love and grief. (“*Expensive. Confessions*” 239-240)

Oates’s words on Richard’s impossibility to deal with the loss of the love object bring to mind Michael Mulvaney’s incapability of living with his daughter after she has been raped.

Second, according to Friedman, by killing his mother, Richard aims at stopping the inevitable initiation that would have occurred if he had not killed her; that is, the process that would have deflated his ideal which is already crumbling. Richard learns that Nada’s demands on him do not stem from a wish to lead him to a higher existence, one worthy of her, but from a wish to deny his existence. First, he learns that she had considered having an abortion when she was pregnant with him. Second, he discovers the results of the I.Q. that Nada forced him to take twice and learns about the malevolence of her demands, since the first results were already positive. Third, he reads “The Molesters” and equals himself to the victim, and Nada to his abuser. Finally, Nada openly disavows her maternal responsibility to Richard by telling him she does not care to be called mother and that she wants him to be free. So Richard kills her to prevent any further revelations of what he interprets as Nada’s betrayals, while at the same time stopping the process of initiation, a process which would have given him emotional independence from Nada. He wants to gain protection against

knowledge and the inexorable process of time. But killing her does not shield him from yet another betrayal: learning her true origins (Friedman *Joyce* 67-68, 70-71).

Oates gives a third reason for Richard's "murder," focused on the sociopolitical context of the 1960s:

*Expensive People*, with its climatic episode of self-destructive violence, was perceived as an expression of the radical discontent, the despair, the bewilderment and the outrage of generation of young and idealistic Americans confronted by an America of their elders so steeped in political hypocrisy and cynicism as to seem virtually irremediable except by the most extreme means. ("Conversations" 184)

As Oates remarks, *Expensive* is set at the onset of the 1960s, the age of counterculture and rebellion, in which young people questioned and objected their parents' practices, as Richard does, and as seen in *Wonderland* as well.

A fourth reason for Richard's "murder" is explained by Oates in the novel's afterword, where she affirms that the novel's codified secret is related to "the execution of an ambitious woman writer as fit punishment for having gone beyond the 'limits of her world'—upstate New York" (*Expensive. Confessions* 242). Nada, who comes from a rural, working-class family, works as a writer and thus occupies a niche mostly associated with men. We might perceive Nada as a character who, in her pursue of a new existence, trespasses the borders that confine her: her humble origins, her unglamorous family, and the private sphere of domestic work.

In any case, as Johnson points out, the ambiguity of whether Richard killed Nada or not is meaningful: the novel refuses to present and interpret "reality" except in a hyperbolic, satiric, and maybe hallucinatory form. What matters is that the world conveyed in the novel, as well as its narrator, are mutually destructive. It also suggests that people with freedom and power inevitably use them toward destructive ends (*Understanding* 69-70). So even not being a killer, Richard's aggressive intentions are equally present.



After Richard's attempts to attain a prominent position in his mother's life prove to be unsuccessful, he decides to commit suicide. For him, the idea of dying comes as a sweet relief from his suffering, which he was unable to totally abate neither compulsively eating nor writing. He considers how "pleasant" dying would be, "getting rid not only of everyone once and for all but getting rid of the desire to get rid of them and desire for any kind of desire at all" (*Expensive* 110). Richard's desire of "getting rid" of everyone includes both his mother and himself, as seen in one of the most enlightening quotations of the novel: "This memoir is a hatchet to slash through my own heavy flesh and through the flesh of anyone who happens to get in the way" (*Expensive* 4). The fact that Richard chooses to kill himself by overeating is no coincidence: he shall die by still attempting to fill himself, this time, not with the intention of compensating for an emotional lack, but with the aim of ending his life.

#### 3.6.2.2 *A Garden of Earthly Delights*: Description and Origin of the Conflict in the Mother-Son Subsystem

In *Garden*, Clara channels her life and gains an increased control over it when she has her baby. As she continuously emphasizes, the baby is *hers*, not only to name but also to possess: he is "the only thing she really owned" (*Garden* 206). The baby's legal name, the one that Revere chooses, is Steven, but she calls him "Swan." The significance of this name is explained later on by Clara:

I would call him Swan because I saw some swans once in a picture, those big white birds that swim around — they look real cool, they're not afraid of anything, their eyes are hard like glass. On a sign it said they were dangerous sometimes. (*Garden* 265)

For her, the name represents strength and courage, qualities that she indeed possesses and wants to transmit to her child. The strength may also refer to the source of empowerment that the baby represents for Clara, since it marks the beginning of her new life. The dangerousness she refers to could be associated with the social expectations of male's

aggressiveness: according to this, Clara is trying to imbue “masculine” traits into him from an extremely early age.

Daly explores the representation of gender in Oates’s work by considering that she began to address the question of gender more directly in *them* for the first time, when, through the siblings Maureen and Jules, she emphasizes and dramatizes gender differences (these differences are examined in the chapter “Children”). In Oates’s initial novels, women cannot solve the problem of gender: those who do not claim male-defined agency remain powerless, silenced in their maternal realm; whereas those who claim this agency and privileged the “I” over family and the community often become agents of death. As a result, women are doomed to fail. The novels *Garden*, *Expensive* and *them* are critical of women who try to achieve power by mirroring men and identifying themselves with male power. In *Garden*, Clara struggles to reach power indirectly, through marriage to a man of a higher social class and through her son, who can directly access his father’s economic power. In *Expensive*, Nada strives as well for power in a secondary manner, through her husband and son; while in *them*, Jules imagines himself achieving power, while his sister looks for economic security through marriage, like Clara and Nada (Daly 28- 31).

Daly poses an interesting connection within the trilogy. First, Oates does not appear to be critical of these female characters’ struggle for power, but of their objective to obtain it by means of traditionally violent male terms. In subsequent works, Oates will show female characters attaining another type of power, originated in their enlarged agency, such as Marya Knauer in *Marya* becoming a college professor, or M.R. Neukirchen in *Mudwoman* as the president of an Ivy league university.

Second, there is a rather relevant difference between Nada and other characters like Clara and Maureen: Nada does indeed achieve her own power through her writing; the problem is that she does not realize it. On the one hand, Clara’s struggle for power in an indirect manner leads her to yield her child to paternal power by despising the name that she has given to him, Swan, as he grows older: it “embarrassed her; it was not a good name. It was no name at all” (*Garden* 330). “Swan” evokes the freedom and unconventionality of her initial experience of

motherhood as the single mother of an illegitimate child, which she has necessarily forsaken in order to gain access to the higher social status of the institution of motherhood by means of marriage. Her rejection of this name implies her acceptance of Revere's name for the boy, Steven, representing her wish to mark him as Revere's legitimate heir and thus, in Irigaray's terms, symbolically erasing his navel as the memory of the scar of the umbilical cord that linked Clara to her son. She is claiming power in an indirect manner, through her son, by delivering him to his father.

On the other hand, Swan states his preference for the name "Steven," which could represent his commitment to his mother's plan of turning him into Revere's sole heir. Nonetheless, this character is referred to as "Swan" throughout the whole novel by the narrator, maybe to emphasize that this is the name that his mother chose for him.

#### 3.6.2.2.1 *Swan's Oedipus Complex*

As a child, being part of a single-parent family of two members, Swan develops a deep positive bond with his mother and finds it difficult to accept the subsequent bonds she will create with other people. Due to this, at times the child exhibits symptoms of possessiveness. However, Clara wishes to maintain her own independence and is not willing to be possessed by her son. The mother-son confrontation in *Garden* is much subtler than in *Expensive*, but more explicitly tinged with Oedipal connotations.

As a little child living alone with his mother, Swan has Clara's total devotion; but when she marries Revere, the boy is forced to share her attention with her new husband. He promptly realizes this alteration upon moving to Revere's house, and contemplates it into rather possessive terms: "After today he would be alone. [...] If he had a bad dream he could not run into Clara; she already belonged to someone else" (*Garden* 267).

As he grows up, Swan's possessiveness of his mother is channeled into sexual jealousy (which is also present, to a lesser extent, in Richard's ponderings about Nada's sexual life). During a visit to some relatives in the city, Swan suspects that Clara is meeting a man and he resents it to the extent of thinking of his mother as a "bitch." He is

shocked to have such thoughts because he had never before considered anything of the sort. In fact, the word seems to have “forced itself out of him” (*Garden* 340), perhaps because he is voicing the misogynistic culture around him that automatically degrades women who display any kind of freedom of choice about their sexuality. In Irigaray’s words, “mothers, and the woman within them, have been trapped in the role of she who satisfies but has no access to desire” (51). For Swan, then, the insult has punitive qualities: he feels that Clara has transgressed rules and needs to be punished for it. But in any case, Swan is not proud of his reaction.

As in the case of *Expensive*, death also occupies a prominent position in the relationship between Clara and Swan in *Garden*. In this case, at the end of the novel, Swan points a gun at his mother, but eventually shoots at his stepfather, and then commits suicide. The relationship between Swan and his mother is seen by Oates as a kind of domestic or Freudian romance, but she adds that it does not really conform a love triangle. A triangle would need a strong father figure, but in *Garden*, the main complex relationship is formed by the mother and her son (Oates “Interview. a” *Conversations with Joyce* 9). The outcome of the complex, however, represents a classical Freudian resolution because the father is killed by the son (in this case, literally); although Swan’s initial target was his mother.

The development of this curious familial bond is certainly complex: Swan exhibits traces of sexual jealousy for his mother from a young age. During the first years of his life, Swan’s relationship with Revere, who visited them from time to time, remained distant. At the time of Swan and Clara’s inclusion into the Revere family, Revere comes to disrupt the mother-child subsystem that had composed the family unit up to that point.

This makes Swan uneasy, and he never develops a close relation to his stepfather. However, he does not perceive him as a serious rival for his mother’s love, since it is plain that Clara does not have very intense feelings for him. Swan cannot then be totally jealous of his stepfather (as he will be with his mother’s suspected lover years later). Revere, then, becomes the blurred and less relevant participant of the Freudian romance.

Being a young man, Swan seems to harbor certain uneasiness toward sex, which could have been partly influenced by the contradictory messages he has received regarding sexuality: his mother has been somewhat communicative about sex; but his stepfather has depicted it as a sin, warning Swan against “temptation.” This fear also connects with Rich’s assertions that a boy feels anxiety about penetrating a woman, as well as a wish to be lost again in a female body, in his case, the body of his second cousin Deborah with whom he has an affair. Deborah reminds Swan of Clara:

He had taken Deborah’s hand [j] and something had flicked across his mind, and in that instant her hand might have changed into Clara’s hand — or it might not have changed — but he had been so shaken he could not remember what he was saying to her. (*Garden* 283)

There is a similar scene in *Bird*, in which the protagonist associates her lover’s hand with that of her late father. In this case, Swan does not welcome the association between his lover and his mother, and he rejects this thought. Upon another occasion, while having an orgasm during sexual intercourse with Deborah, he sees his mother’s face. This vision does not seem to be a conscious thought, but his sexual confusion is unmistakable. It could be a symptom that his Oedipus complex is not fully solved, because he is associating his mother with a sexual partner. In Kaschak’s terms, an unsolved Oedipus complex leads to an egotistical search for power that may be destructive to others: in fact, Swan will shoot his father, among other reasons, due to his sense of having failed to claim power for himself.

#### 3.6.2.2.2 *Swan’s Murder-Suicide*

The tension brought about by all these feelings erupts in Swan’s act of violence at the end of the novel. The murder-suicide that ends his stepfather’s life as well as his own can be interpreted as Swan’s violent attempt to solve the two-participant Oedipus complex; but there are two additional reasons for his outburst that need to be explored.

The first reason for Swan’s shooting lies in his identity conflict as the “bastard” Swan Revere and the “legitimate heir” Steven Revere, as

remarked by Johnson. Like Jesse in *Wonderland*, Swan feels an uncertainty over his identity that is reflected in his name, and he wonders whether he is Swan Walpole, as his mother used to call him; or Steven Revere, as Revere (and later on Clara) insists (*Understanding* 39-40).

The conflict around Swan's names is a reflection of the deterministic forces that Swan's three parents (Clara, Revere and the non-custodial biological father Lowry) place upon him, from which he will try to flee, particularly from Lowry's prediction that he will become a murderer. Bender notices that, for Swan, names are magical, in the sense that they are accursed, doomed. His double name marks a fatal self-division, a split that widens into madness, intensifying a final murderous rage (26). In order to find a steady sense of self, Swan initially tries to localize his identity in his three parents: his mother Clara, his biological non-custodial father Lowry and his stepfather Revere.

Clara initially contributes to Swan's confusion by giving him very limited information about her Family System of Origin: she tells him that she has no last name since her father casted her out, an assertion which is not totally accurate. In Friedman's view, Clara's refusal to tell Swan about his origins increases the boy's sense of dislocation (*Joyce* 44). He eventually finds out the surname "Walpole" in his mother's marriage certificate.

According to Friedman, dislocation is in Oates one of the great dramas of the Great Depression, by which fathers and sons have to work for others and subsequently lose their sense of belonging (*Joyce* 4). In *Garden*, the theme of dislocation links Swan to his grandfather Carleton: both of them feel lost and disoriented due to the displacements they experience, namely, an identity dislocation in the case of Swan and a geographical and familial dislocation in the case of his grandfather. Swan apparently acquires a solid place in the world provided by Revere, but he feels nonetheless displaced due to his blurred family origins; whereas Carleton had to abandon his farm in search of migrant jobs along the country, taking all his family along with him. In contrast, by running away and eventually marrying Revere, Clara finally finds a

sense of permanence, but the consequences of her father's displacement are still perceived in Swan; if not physically, psychologically.

The next great influence in Swan's identity split is Lowry. Swan only meets his biological father once, but this brief encounter will have terrible consequences for him since, as Bender notices, Swan's patrimony is neither Walpole nor Revere, it is the curse uttered by Lowry at this moment, as a bitter reaction to Clara's rejection: he tells the child he shall kill lots of things (26). Interestingly, the only thing that Lowry ever says to his son is related to stereotypes on male strength and violence. Although Swan becomes tragically chained to Lowry's premonition, this is not a role that he would have freely chosen for himself, since he resents violence and how it is often encouraged (or at least not discouraged) in men. Ironically, then, Swan fulfils Lowry's premonition not because he wishes it or because he cannot really escape from it, but because he is persuaded of the impossibility of fleeing from it. He is convinced of the power of deterministic forces in his life, and eventually surrenders to them, unlike the characters from *them*.

Bender associates Swan's inner division, reflected in his two names, with Yeatsian metaphors, particularly, seen in "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917). When Clara gives her son this name, Oates seems to be evoking the godly flock, the wild swans; but the reference is ironic: Clara's charm is powerless to save her son from Lowry's curse (26-27). In other words, Clara names her son after a wild and free creature, but this does not allow her to liberate him from the deterministic forces that Swan sees in Lowry's premonition.

Friedman continues to explore this comparison by pointing to the fact that the title of the book is an allusion to Hieronymus Bosch's homonymous triptic (1490-1500), which is dominated by gigantic birds and vegetation that conform the imagery of Swan's section of the book. Oates has said that the title *A Garden of Earthly Delights* would be "Swan's title for the story of his life" (qtd. in Friedman *Joyce* 50).

Finally, Revere also has a definite effect over Swan's inner conflict. When Swan and Clara move to Revere's house, the child is told that his name is "Steven Revere." His mother encourages him to accept this name as a sign of his future role as Revere's heir, and the boy wishes to obey his mother, but he does not totally approve of

Revere's lifestyle, as we shall see. It is possible, too, that Swan resents the submission of his mother to Revere. Swan wishes to have a different name, but he rejects his mother's maiden surname, and although he does not know his biological father's surname, he rejects him too. Thus, all his choices seem to lead him nowhere.

Revere, Johnson argues, is not a ruthless capitalist figure despite representing traditional male power. His love for Clara seems genuine and at times, his bewilderment suggests that he is victimized by his own social role. However, he does represent those economic forces that have tempted Clara from the garden of her innocence into the nightmarish "garden of earthly delights" of the title. Toward the end of the novel, Oates suggests that this garden stands for America as a whole. Clara does not perceive that it is her son the one who endures the burden of consciousness in the novel, understanding both his mother's victimization and his own role as the heir of a capitalist and landowner power (*Understanding* 40-41). In other words, Swan is certainly the one who has to deal with the weight of his parents' ambitions, inconsistencies and frustrations. The other main characters (Clara, Revere and Lowry) are the ones to put into motion the deterministic forces that Swan will try to overcome, and he is actually the one who realizes, and assumes, the consequences of their actions.

When meeting Revere, Swan ponders that he can love him if he does not force him to go hunting and "kill things" (*Garden* 260); that is, if he does not forcibly introduce him into the traditionally masculine activities he hates, since he feels uncomfortable in the stereotypical masculine domain, and at the same time is not allowed to participate in other traditionally female activities he enjoys such as staying with female relatives inside the house during family reunions.

But Revere (with Clara's approval) makes him go hunting. This proves that, as Johnson affirms, society at the time placed a terrible burden on men, aimed at power and conquest, and so Swan and his grandfather Carleton age prematurely, destroyed by a sense of personal failure (*Understanding* 45). Swan feels directed by both his fathers toward a destiny he fears and hates: Lowry has predicted he would become a killer, and Revere is forcing him to actually kill living beings by going hunting, with tragic results, as we shall soon explain.



His mother is also pushing Swan toward violence, in a subtler manner, by placing into his mind the urge to become Revere's sole heir and to dispossess Revere's sons of their share of the will: "You're going to take everything away from them and kick them out of this house, so what the hell if they push you around now? Remember that. Someday you'll get back at him—you'll be his best son" (*Garden* 270). Moreover, when moving into Revere's house, Clara discloses to her son the reason why she has married Revere: "you're getting a new father. You're getting a name. That much I'm doing for you, all your life you'll be a Revere!" (*Garden* 271). Curiously, her marriage is a token of her love for Swan and not for Revere. Clara expects Swan to be Revere's sole heir, and he internally vows to do everything she wants.

In the next years, Swan will eventually discover Clara's maiden name by surreptitiously finding her marriage certificate. At this point, his family situation becomes clearer, but this does not solve his conflict: the identity he exposes to the world as Revere's legitimate heir is false, since he is not really his son, and Swan is aware of this, because he had instinctively known that Lowry was his real father when he met him.

A terrible accident will confirm Swan's fears about his inescapable destiny as a killer: the death of his brother Robert. Swan's relation with his stepsiblings is rather strained. The youngest brother, Robert, is the most sympathetic to him, and shares his aversion to hunting, although he resignedly performs the activity. Despite their common grounds, Swan will accidentally contribute to his death, which takes place after both of them go hunting, an activity to which Swan has agreed because his beloved mother has instructed him to gain Revere's affection in order to become his sole heir. Tragically, on their way back, they meet their brother Jonathan, who insults Swan and calls him a "bastard." Swan angrily asks Robert the reasons for such treatment, and shoves him in anger, which causes Robert's gun to go off and shoot him in the face.

Robert's demise is described as an accident, but Swan may have contributed to it partly on purpose. Johnson cites two reasons for this half-conscious killing. The first one is Swan's insecure place in the family and his position as "bastard." Secondly, by killing Robert, whether intentionally or not, Swan is trying to kill the weakness in him,

his gentle part that would rather coexist harmoniously with nature than subdue it through brute force (*Understanding* 42-43).

In any case, Swan believes that Lowry's prophecy is becoming true at this point. Other characters seem to confirm this as well: after the accident, some people, including his stepbrother Jonathan, become afraid of him. Consequently, in the following years, Swan comes to consider himself "a killer who had not finished his work but was waiting for his deed to rise up in him" (*Garden* 377). In this manner, in Daly's words, the child becomes what his mother dreamed of and his biological father predicted: a swan-like man, cold, unafraid and dangerous: the future murderer of his father (31). Thus, Swan's three parents encourage him toward violence in several manners: Lowry predicts that he will be a killer, Clara promotes his forceful imposition over his brothers as an heir, and Revere forces him to perform aggressive activities that his mother also approves of.

Swan's division into Swan Walpole and Steven Revere is also reflected in his conflictive aspirations for the future. "Swan" wishes to receive a formal education or to become an artist; while "Steven" yearns to be a landowner. Once again, these two options are presented as irreconcilable goals for this character. Clara had always tried to provide his son with the educated life she could not have as a child: she urges him to go to university and gain a better understanding of the world. It seems that Clara is turning her child into a means of compensation for her own deprivations, a process that Rich explains by asserting that when a woman spends her energy and power on making her son into her instrument, her agent in a system which has tried to keep her powerless, the son lives under the burden of his mother un-lived lives (207). Thus, if Clara could have claimed power for herself, she should not have needed to claim it by means of Revere, and Swan would not have felt the enormous pressure of her expectations of him.

Swan is thus the first of Oates's intellectual prodigies, in Bender's opinion (27). Johnson considers Swan, along with his cousin Deborah, a helpless intellectual character: they are drawn to the world of books and ideas, but they are personally ineffectual (at times, even clownish) in their harsh external social and natural environment, to which people like Clara adapt by hardening themselves and abandoning thought and

reflection. Richard from *Expensive* and Jesse from *Wonderland* are similarly intellectual: they both will make a doomed effort to conquer their world and forge a personal identity by accumulating knowledge (*Understanding* 41-42).

In *Garden*, at the beginning, Swan absorbs his mother's desire for acquiring an education; and as a child, he prefers reading to playing with other children. However, keeping this inclination will become arduous for him in the years to come. While rewriting the novel for its revised edition, Oates had the opportunity to reflect upon this process while at the same time recognizing a certain resemblance with the character:

I see [Swan] as a kind of an alter ego for whom the life of the imagination (he's a bookish child, in a world in which books are devaluated) is finally repudiated, as it was not, of course for me [j] Swan is burn-out, self-loathing, and finally a suicide because his truest self has been denied, and that "true self" would have been a writer-self, an explorer of cultural and spiritual worlds. I would not have known in 1965-66 [when the novel was written] how this young man's experience would parallel the ways in which America would seem to have repudiated, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and even into the morally debased economically ravaged twenty-first century, a further loss of innocence of this nation at such odds with its own ideals and grandiloquent visions. *Swan, c'est moi!* (But only in fantasy). ("Conversations" 183, emphasis in the original)

Indeed, as years elapse, Swan's inclination toward art enters into conflict with his aim, and familial pressure, to inherit Revere's land:

he had to stop reading. He had to stop thinking. [j] He had no time for it all, and if he couldn't do it all, then what was the point in doing any of it? He could not go away to college because he was terrified of leaving this land, of relinquishing what he had won in his father. And he was terrified that he himself might forget the strange, almost magical air of Revere's world [j] if he should forget all

he had learned, all he had been born for, what then? [j]  
If he kept reading, his mind would burst, but if he pushed  
his books aside and rejected everything, he would never  
learn all he had to learn — for knowledge was power and  
he needed power. [j] Between the two impulses he felt  
his muscles tense as if preparing themselves for violence.  
(*Garden* 356)

Thus, Swan is torn in several manners. In Araújo's words, Swan becomes haunted by his role as an heir: he does not want to renounce the power that his mother has fought so hard to provide him with, the one he was born to receive (401); but at the same time, dedicating his time to the farm prevents him from focusing on his studies, and he considers this essential for his acquiring control. The strain from this dilemma pushes him to violence.

Clara has actively contributed to his dichotomy by urging him to take control of Revere's land while at the same time encouraging him to get university studies, but Swan perceives these two goals as conflictive: he fears that continuing his studies will cause him to lose the land. Therefore, despite the insistence of the school's principal and his mother, Swan finally decides not to go to college, arguing that he does not need to. Cologne-Brookes lists three reasons that lead Swan to choose this. First, this serves him as a method to rebel against his mother, because he hates her materialistic world (although we need to add that he certainly has his own ambitious side) and wishes to destroy not only what Clara has gained for him but also the whole world. Second, he decides that reading and writing are dangerous because they give too much meaning to the world. Finally, reading distances him from his classmates, whom he sees swirling around their trivial world of friendships and hatreds (*Dark Eyes* 35). Cologne-Brookes's list is precise, but he appears to somewhat overlook the complexity of Swan's feelings for Clara: he simultaneously hates her and loves her, and this is reflected in his wish for revenge and his pointing a gun at her; as well as his final decision against killing her.

Swan's decision to abandon his studies comes as the saddest disappointment in Clara's life, because she is convinced that he could have had the education that she did not receive. Revere, on the other

hand, agrees with Swan: he does not find attending college much relevant, and mentions that he himself did not go to the university.

Swan subsequently starts to work in Revere's farming business. He has new ideas that could bring great benefits for his family (like buying land out from partners) but Revere hesitates to enact them, so that Swan is not allowed to make decisions on his own: he still needs to respond to his stepfather. Therefore, he has relinquished an academic life to focus on his stepfather's business, but he finds that he is not allowed to make decisions. His frustration starts to accumulate: "he didn't want to step into the place his father had made for himself; instead, he wanted to get rid of it all, destroy all, everything, the entire world!" (*Garden* 377). Therefore, he realizes that his decision to become a landowner has not brought any solution to his conflicts; and we can perceive that his psychological turmoil has become dangerous, as Johnson points out (*Understanding* 43). Besides, in Cologne-Brookes's words, Swan sees nothing in his future apart from a struggle with Revere's sons (*Dark Eyes* 35).

Araújo (401) mentions another reason for Swan's explosion of violence, which can be considered a summary of the previously mentioned ones: Swan feels he lacks control, despite his social status and economic security. Acquiring control is something that haunts other Oatesian characters like Richard from *Expensive*, Jules and Maureen from *them*, and Jesse from *Wonderland*. Clara had wanted to give her son a security she never had as a child: she had hoped him to grow up into someone who had control over his life all the time, and not only sporadically like her. Despite her efforts, though, her son cannot achieve this, not even after choosing to become Revere's heir.

The day he dies, Swan goes to see a movie, whose plot he perceives as a reflection of his own impotence: he realizes the actors are just saying words someone has written for them and feels uneasy, possibly noticing as well the burden of what he perceives to be his inescapable destiny: becoming a killer. Art serves as a metaphor for paranoia here, according to Bender. Swan had tried to suppress the power of his creative intelligence, aping his mother's illiteracy and avoiding libraries, but he cannot free himself of his book-ridden past (27).

After watching the film, Swan meets his cousin and lover Deborah in a motel, and tries to explain his existential anguish to her:

I don't know who made me the person I am now but I have this strange idea it's someone who's watching me right now. [j] And I loathe that person [j] he made me come alive and is following it through to the end, and I can never get free — The bastard! [j] Or maybe it's a woman. I don't want anything else but to be free [j] I don't want to be a character in a story, in a book. I don't want to be like someone in a movie. (*Garden* 391)

Swan has recognized the origin of his fear at the cinema: his rage at his own entrapment, at the determinism that, he feels, dictates his life. He blames Lowry for this, because he considers that he has forced him to meet his destiny; but he also resents his mother as the one who initiated the chain of events leading to his present dilemma. This determinism is associated as well with the idea of becoming the character of a story, which brings to mind Richard's situation in *Expensive*.

In the early morning of the next day, Swan goes to the farm to confront his mother, the person whom he most loves, and the one he regards as ultimately responsible for his misery. He tries to inform her about his feelings, but words fail him. Clara accuses him of having wasted his intelligence and asserts that he is just as weak as Lowry was. Totally unable to answer to these accusations, Swan points the gun at her, but is unable to shoot her. Instead, he kills Revere and then commits suicide.

Suicide is a complex phenomenon, which presents considerably divergent psychological features. At times, there is a psychiatric disorder involved; or either low self-esteem, ideas of unworthiness, and a sense of hopelessness. Some authors, like Beck, suggest that a sense of hopelessness might mark the difference between the appearance of misery and suicidal activity. Edwin Schneideman described a "cubic model on suicide" based on his study of over 5,000 suicide notes. Schneideman describes three broad themes for suicide. First, perturbation, psychic pain or extreme stress. Second, psychological constriction: in this condition, the person believes that there is no other

option, psychological or social, to solve her/his perturbation. Third, penchant for action, or at least impulsivity (when a person is in a state of extreme despair but does not have sufficient energy to act, she/he is left immobilized) (qtd. in Pritchard 57). Swan presents these three factors: his pain comes from an existential conflict that he cannot solve, and which prompts him to contemplate death as the only suitable solution. Moreover, his penchant for action is possibly motivated by the helplessness he has always felt regarding his future: this moves him to take radical and violent measures.

Suicide is not merely a reaction to external stress, although a recent dramatic downhill course (e.g., drop in income, a change in work, separation or divorce) can often be identified. Rather, suicide is an event that is described as having biological (and biochemical), psychological, interpersonal, situational, sociological, cultural, philosophical and existential components. When understanding suicide risk in a person, we find that there is not a predictive behavior, but there are two essential concepts to this understanding: lethality and perturbation. Lethality is the probability of a person killing herself/himself. It is a psychological state of mind. Perturbation refers to subjective distress (that is, disturbed, agitated, sane-insane, decomposed). A person can be perturbed and not suicidal. Lethality kills, not perturbation (Pritchard 21). We perceive both components of perturbation and lethality in Swan: the perturbation has been caused by his troubled approach to his identity, and lethality has been bred by his mounting sense of impotence and loss of control about his life.

There are several factors that can explain suicide, which can be divided in two main sections: intrapsychic and interpersonal factors. Among the intrapsychic factors, we find unbearable psychological pain (that seems to be relieved by committing suicide), cognitive constriction (involving rigidity or tunnel vision, which makes suicide seem the only solution available), inability to adjust (which may be caused by psychiatric disorders; or the feeling that one cannot overcome her/his problems due to being too weak), or the weakening of the ego due to some trauma (which hinders the development of constructive techniques to overcome personal difficulties). Swan is indeed feeling a pain that he deems endless, and he is certainly thinking in tunnel vision:

he cannot comply with his future vital options and considers death as the only solution. He has not been able to adjust to his decision of being Revere's heir, and feels overwhelmed by the trauma of Lowry's prediction.

The interpersonal factors involve, first, the difficulty to establish or maintain interpersonal relationships. Frequently, there is a disturbed, unbearable interpersonal situation. At this respect, suicide appears to be related to frustrated attachment needs. This can be found in Swan's complicated bond with his three parents. Second, we find a pattern of rejection-aggression. Loss is central to suicide, in fact, there is often a rejection that is experienced as an abandonment. It is an unbearable narcissistic injury, which leads to hate directed to others and self-blame. Suicide is deeply ambivalent. Sometimes, it is the result of turning back upon oneself murderous impulses: it may be veiled aggression, murder in the 180th degree. Indeed, Swan is turning his external aggressiveness into himself (after turning it to his stepfather too). Third, there is another pattern of identification-egression, involving a lost ideal (e.g., youth, health, career, freedom) that becomes crucial in understanding the suicidal person. Identification is defined as an attachment based on an important emotional bond with another person or any ideal. If this emotional need is not met, the suicidal person experiences a deep pain and wants to egress; that is, to leave, to exit, to be dead (Pritchard 23-24). Certainly, Swan feels that he has lost his future, his freedom and his control over his life, something that he cannot tolerate. He is also unable to find a deep emotional bond to others: his bond to his parents is too troubled, and his affair with Deborah is similarly detached.

As Mizen and Morris highlight (190), successful suicide may disguise the rage that the person feels towards a persecuting or attacking world, or objects in it. The rage that Swan feels at the moment is plain, as proved by his confrontation with Clara and his killing of Revere.

Grant (48) sees Swan's suicide as a proof of his complete powerlessness. In fact, Mizen and Morris' description of suicide perfectly fits the case of Swan. They argue that, by killing themselves, some people are able to kill their version of the world, which they strongly dislike; or even to flee from the powerlessness of the inescapable reality of passing away by becoming their own death's



authors. Thus, the reality of death is inverted: life is full of threat while death becomes a “tabula rasa” upon which attractive fantasies may be painted (190). Consequently, death comes for Swan as a way out of a world that appears to hold nothing for him, and as a way to end his sense of impotence in front of the forces governing his life.

Swan’s suicide could also be interpreted in opposite terms as his ultimate and desperate means of re-acquiring lost control. As Hendin argues, “[s]uicide is, paradoxically, a way of taking control of one’s self, of one’s identity when faced with psychological annihilation. The predominant emotions in suicidal patients are rage, hopelessness, despair and guilt” (qtd. in De Zulueta 227). Oates appears to confirm this characteristic about suicide when she describes it in her article “‘Zero at Bone’: Despair as Sin and Enlightenment” (compiled in *Where I’ve Been, and Where I’m Going. Essays, Reviews, and Prose*) as “the most willful [j] of human acts” (*Where I’ve Been* 64). Moreover, hopelessness about the future is often correlated with suicidal incident: if an individual has a sense of hopelessness about change and a sense that life is impossible without that change, this can lead to despair and suicide (De Zulueta 227). Thus, by killing himself, Swan is able to become at last the agent of his own destiny. This is somewhat ironical, of course, since he is destroyed in the process of acquiring control over his life.

Specifically, what Swan commits is a murder-suicide. This is not a rare occurrence: the suicidal feelings can also be linked to homicidal ones, as was found to be the case in 30% of violent individuals (Hendin qtd. in De Zulueta 227). Swan kills Revere out of resentment for the position of power he holds over Clara and himself. Swan’s frustration, Johnson adds, has led him to kill Revere as a way to strike at a masculine world he could not emulate: he can only reproduce its primary method of expression, that is, violence. Thus, as in many of Oates’s fictions, the novel ends in an eruption of violence that resembles the last act of a Renaissance tragedy (*Understanding* 43).

Curiously, just like Swan, in the revised version of *Garden*, Swan’s maternal grandfather Carleton commits suicide. Although his grandchild never learns about this, he seems to be completing a loop of tragedy within the Walpole family. In Oates’s words, “Swan’s ending

is pre-determined; he replicates the fate of his grandfather Carleton, whom he has never met. Self-destructive, because self-condemning” (“Conversations” 183). According to Grant (128), the tragedy of Carleton’s life is that he thinks that he has no power at all to change things, an affirmation that can be applied to Swan as well.

Johnson reads the novel as a critique of the American dream and its drive toward money, acquisition and power. The three generations of the Walpole family (Carleton, Clara and Swan) represent a microcosm of American society ranging from the economic outcast to the youthful heir. The Walpoles advance materially but cannot escape the spiritual destruction ensured by their assuming the perverted and antihumanistic values of their society. Like the painting from Hieronymus Bosch from which the title is borrowed, the novel is allegorical. According to Rose Marie Burwell, who compares Bosch’s triptic to the novel, the painting shows “the creation of Eve in Eden, the debauchery of her descendants in the earthly garden of delights, and the punishment of mankind in hell” (qtd. in Johnson *Understanding* 44). Eden is barren in this novel; and the debauchery of the characters is caused by their efforts to survive, and so their punishment is unmerited. The moral burden of the novel is not individual “sin” but the basic imperatives of American economic and social reality (*Understanding* 44-45).

In the end, thus, Clara’s American dream is broken by the circumstances she has created for her child, who initially was her access ticket to that dream. Clara goes to live to a nursing home, where she acts distantly and coolly, uninterested by anything except violent television shows.

### **3.6.3 Revaluation of Mother-Son Relationships**

Rich argues that the mother-son relationships are being reevaluated, and the corpus seems to reflect this tendency if we compare the sons’ reactions in *Expensive* and *Garden* with Aaron’s attitude towards his mother in *Bird*. This revaluation may be especially hard for the sons, who may feel utterly alone in the masculine world due to their lack of close relationships with other men, particularly, of relationships which are distinct from the male bonding in defense of male privilege (Rich

206). This loneliness of the male world is acutely felt by Swan, who as a child preferred the company of adult female relatives (but was discouraged from pursuing it), and who could not find a connection with other boys.

*Expensive* presents a son who demands from his mother a traditional enactment of motherhood as institution, which follows the guidelines of intensive mothering and places the child before any other interest or concern. In fact, Richard goes to extreme extents to try to control his mother and transform her to his liking, with very little success: Nada refuses to be reduced to a single identity trait, and thus, she does neither totally become a mother, or a writer; but she does not completely renounce to these roles. We might thus deduce that she does not perceive procreativity and creativity as conflictive life choices, as her son does. In any case, these functions are submitted to Nada's socioeconomic ambition, and thus are not satisfactory to her.

In *Garden*, Swan experiences an identity conflict derived from his blurred triple origin, which he is not able to solve. Along with this, he cannot construct or imagine a satisfactory future for himself. These two factors cause a strong feeling of resentment toward his mother which culminates in an attempt to kill her, and eventually, in the murder of his stepfather and Swan's suicide, thus somewhat fulfilling his biological father's premonition.

*Expensive* and *Garden*, despite their divergent settings, present several interesting parallelisms. First, both Nada and Clara strive for indirect power by means of their husbands, instead of claiming power in their own name. In contrast, their sons fiercely (and unsuccessfully) try to gain control not only over their destinies, but also upon their mothers' lives, whom they try to possess. This eagerness leads to a tragic ending in both novels, particularly in *Garden*.

Second, both novels feature a special kind of Oedipal bond, which cannot qualify as a triangle because the father figure is extremely blurred and irrelevant. Perhaps we could interpret this as the early symptoms of either a waning fatherly authority in Oates's fiction, or to their complete adscription to the role of breadwinners in the traditional family. In neither of these books is the Oedipus complex solved in

Kaschak terms, since the sons acquire a sense of entitlement and consider that their mothers should not be independent.

Third, both novels end with the suicide (in *Expensive*, the imminent suicide) of the sons. This suggests the destructive and self-destructive effects derived from the sons' attitude, which somehow originates in the expectations about family roles: Richard is obsessed with making his mother conform to the role of a traditional mother designed for women, and Swan finds no satisfaction in becoming Revere's heir.

*Expensive* and *Garden* may be compared with *Bird*: in these three novels, the sons show certain resentment for their mothers and their mothers' yearn for independence. In particular, Richard's anger is directed at Nada's refusal to totally commit herself to traditional motherhood; Swan feels embittered due to the conflictive goals that originate in his confused origin, to which his mother has partly contributed, and due to the confused feelings of attachment and rejection he has for Clara; while Aaron partially resents Zoe's abandonments caused by her singing career (although he also understands her dedication), and later on her death. In fact, in *Expensive* and *Bird*, the dilemmas caused by the mothers' dual dedication to procreativity and creativity are clearly portrayed, but in the former novel they are more problematic than in the latter. Moreover, Richard and Swan resent the high demands that their mothers place upon them. In the end, the yearn for control that these sons develop is detrimental for both their mothers and themselves. Finally, Richard and Swan exhibit symptoms of sexual jealousy, which indicates their inability to admit their mothers' sexual freedom. These two last characteristics are not found in Aaron, which accepts Zoe's independence much more easily.

Moreover, the possessiveness that characterizes *Expensive* and *Garden* is not present in *Bird*, where Aaron Kruller has to deal with his mother's abandoning her husband and yet he negotiates this trauma in a rather healthy manner. Aaron's feelings for his mother are ambiguous since he loves her but at the same time is hurt over her leaving the family home. Even if it is considered that Zoe is eventually "punished" for abandoning her family, it is neither her husband nor her son the ones

who execute this punishment, which may function as a promise that mother-son relationships may become more democratic and less sexist.





## 4 FATHERS

This chapter presents a parallel structure to the previous chapter, “Mothers.” First, we shall introduce the discussion with the definitions of what a father is from a biological and a social point of view. After this, we will focus on the theme of legitimacy and non-custodial fathers. Afterwards, there is a discussion about the relationship of men to work, and the implications that this role has had for the families through American history. The last two main parts cover the relationships between fathers and daughters and fathers and sons, drawing similarities among them.

### 4.1 FATHERHOOD AS BIOLOGICAL AND/OR SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

Just as in the previous section we have distinguished between Adrienne Rich’s concepts of motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution, fatherhood can be approached by adopting similar parameters and establishing a distinction between the biological and social aspects of fatherhood, as Hobson and Morgan highlight in the introduction to their edited book *Making Men into Fathers. Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood* (2002). We shall initially define these two notions and subsequently explore their implications.

As Hobson and Morgan reflect, if by biological fatherhood we understand the process by which a man begets a child, social fatherhood would be the cultural coding of men as fathers. Social fatherhood is closely linked to the institutions, and thus configured by civil laws around marriage, divorce and custody. Through laws and policies, all states directly and indirectly shape the borders of fatherhood and father identities, by defining, for instance, who the father is (the biological father or the social father) and on what basis. Moreover, the relationships within individual families shape the practices of fathers, as seen in the division of care and decision-making within the household (Hobson and Morgan 10-11, 14).

As Hearn explains in his article “Men, Fathers and the State: National and Global Relations” (2002), fatherhood has historically been an institution of power (254). In this sense, fatherhood as institution can be understood as a power-infusion mechanism for men, whereas the institution of motherhood has actively worked to justify and enact the subordination of women to their biological reproductive capacity. As a consequence, Paterna and Martínez affirm, in contrast with women, men are neither forced to become fathers, nor punished for begetting children under certain circumstances (212).

However, as in the case of motherhood, fatherhood is diversely experienced by different men. In fact, the present section shall prove how the power of the traditional father/husband has become undermined in recent decades, and how classical configurations of the nuclear family have been altered almost continually. From a strict biological perspective, the role of the father is limited to providing “sperm that fertilizes the ovum.” The way in which this has been symbolically interpreted for millenniums has contributed to justify the father’s dominance over his children. As Tubert explains, resorting to Carol Delaney’s article “The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate” (published in 1986) fatherhood does not have a primarily or exclusively physiological meaning, since its biophysical elements are also used to express a social significance, which is reflected in gender relations, power relationships and kinship. Fatherhood goes beyond the simple recognition of the physiological bond between father and child. Traditionally, men’s role in reproduction was associated with the act of begetting, and subsequently interpreted as a primary, essential and creative role. This conception is related to the myth of the virginal birth of the Virgin Mary. For Delaney, this paradigm is the spiritualized version of a millennium-long, popular and predominant Western conception: monogenetic conception, which considers that the child is created from a single source; and subsequently concludes that the mother receives and nurtures, whereas the man creates and transmits. In the myth of the virginal birth, God creates the son, and Mary is simply a means to manifest this creation. In short, monotheistic doctrines become the purest expression of the theory of monogenetic procreation. Monogenesis and monotheism are part of the same



symbolic system, which results in the structural symbolical alliance between God and men in which they share their power, whereas women are symbolically linked to the earth, a usable material for the creations of men (Delaney qtd. in Tubert 35-38).

These conceptions have tied women to their biological function, particularly the raising up of children; while giving men the right to possess them, originally based on the belief on their privileged place in the process of procreation. Although the ovum was discovered in 1826 by Von Baer, it was not until the development of genetics in the twentieth century that it could be established that half of the genetic makeup of the ovum comes from the mother and the other half comes from the father, so that both women and men contribute to procreation on equal grounds (Tubert 38).

Commonly, then, motherhood and fatherhood have not been perceived as equivalent activities. Rich argues that the meaning of fatherhood remains

tangential, elusive. To father a child suggests above all to beget, to provide sperm which fertilizes the ovum. [j] To “mother” a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years. Motherhood is earned, first as an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct. A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded “illegitimate” [...] Whatever her choice, her body has undergone irreversible changes, her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event. (12)

Therefore, compared to women, men have been generally less pressured to fulfil their responsibility toward their progeny. This disparity between being a biological mother or a father is clearly alluded to in the revision of *Garden*, where Clara states: “A man can be a father and

hardly know it. But a woman, that's different" (Oates *Garden* 2006, 305). Lowry is a good example of this possibility of being unconcerned about conception.

As Rich concludes, women's potentiality to become mothers is more powerfully perceived than men's potentiality to become fathers: "Woman has always known herself both as daughter and as potential mother, while in his dissociation from the process of conception man first experiences himself as son, and only much later as father" (118). Accordingly, the female characters of the corpus often reflect on their potentiality to reproduce, a question that is not so heavily reflected upon by male characters.

As in the case of motherhood, apart from a biological experience, fatherhood also represents a social experience, and the ways in which fatherhood has been socially perceived have greatly changed in time. As Hearn argues, fathers need to be understood as gendered and as men; and fatherhood needs to be understood as an institution, historically constructed as a form of certain men's power. From his perspective, fathers and fatherhood are social rather than "natural" or biological constructions. They are intimately connected with the social production and reproduction of men, masculinities and men's practices (245).

As a form of male power, the father figure has historically represented the ultimate source of authority and power in the patriarchal tradition as the main (and mostly only) economic provider of the nuclear family. Patriarchy literally means "rule by the father." Historically, the term referred to a system of government where older men governed women and younger men through their position as heads of the household. Today, the term is used to describe systematic power inequalities between women and men (Burr 14-15).

Another crucial issue for patriarchy is property, which Irigaray comments upon by quoting Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) in order to highlight the patriarch domination over the family unit:

Patriarchal order is the one that functions as *the organization and monopolization of private property to the benefit of the head of the family*. It is his proper name, the name of the father, that determines ownership for the

family, including the wife and the children. And what is required from them — for the wife, monogamy; for the children, the precedence of the male line, and specifically of the eldest son who bears the name — is also required so as to ensure “the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual.” (Irigaray 129-130, emphasis in the original)

As Hearn points out, patriarchy is a historically specific form of societal organization with its own particular characteristics, dynamics and structural tendencies, instead of a principle of universal social organization. Men’s power in patriarchy is partly maintained through the traits that men share with one another: they are bound together (not necessarily consciously) by dominant sexuality, violence and potential violence, social and economic privilege, the power of the father, and political power more generally. Nonetheless, the idea of a unity of men is a myth: men’s collective power is maintained in part, too, through the assumption of hegemonic forms of men and masculinities (usually described as white, heterosexual, able-bodied men; or breadwinners, fathers, etc.) to the relative exclusion of other forms of marginalized or subordinated men and masculinities. We might thus deduce that masculinities are not homogenous and unified, but eclectic (Hearn 248-249).

But to recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity, relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relations are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, etc. Hegemony does not mean total control. It is not automatic, and may be disrupted, or even disrupt itself (Connell *Masculinities* 38).

Hegemony, Connell affirms, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. Hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of gender practice that guarantees, or is taken to guarantee, the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Hegemony is a historically mobile relation, and so new groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony (*Masculinities* 77).

Thus, Snider argues, men construct their identity in the same way that all identities are built, by choosing among the options they see as available and satisfying for people who are like them, that is, people who share their class, race, neighborhood, family and gender. In the heterogeneous Western society, there is a wide range of masculinities available, which offer both much choice and much confusion. The patriarchal man is still the ideal choice, particularly in mass culture. This model is promoted in media and sports and is appealing and visible to boys who lack alternative models. Peer groups of adolescents, alienated from mainstream authority, use sports, rap and mass culture to develop ideas of what it means to be a man in a certain race, class, religion, culture and time (Snider 163). Consequently, as Arrighi asserts, this kind of masculinity is not exclusively transmitted from father to son: there is a network of socializing agents who contribute to it, especially the family. The list includes the parents, siblings, extended kin, teachers, coaches, peers and the media (175).

As White and Woollett explain, despite the number of available options for men, becoming a father is often presented as just one more role among many in men's lives. In other words, fatherhood does not place so many restrictions upon men as the institution of motherhood imposes on women, and in fact, men have usually endured less pressure to form a family (17). Irigaray agrees with this view: according to her, men, unlike women, have never been reduced to their reproductive function (130).

We may distinguish three types of fathers by taking into account their relationship with fatherhood as a biological phenomenon and fatherhood as institution: biological and social fathers, exclusively social fathers, and exclusively biological fathers.

Biological and social fathers, found in each novel from the corpus, are those who have actually impregnated the mother, and then legally recognized the child as his progeny: the question of legitimacy becomes central. Legitimacy originally represents the attempt to legitimate the biological experience of fatherhood and bring it into the legal and social order/system. As such, it may be placed at the origin of the social experience of fatherhood. Legitimacy is not an easily defined term. According to Rich, it

probably goes deeper than even the desire to hand on one's possessions to one's own blood-line; it cuts back to the male need to say: "I, too, have the power of procreation—these are *my* seed, *my* own begotten children, *my* proof of elemental power." (Rich 119, emphasis in the original)

Thus, Rich suggests how in the case of fatherhood, legitimacy links the transmission of the father's genes into a child with the power and authority that he has not only over that child, but also over the mother, as we have explained when commenting the roles of mothers.

Furthermore, since in contrast with motherhood, the biological experience of fatherhood is not so bodily or physiologically evident, in the case of fathers, the legitimate father, the one who exerts the role as a social father, does not always coincide with the biological father. For instance, in *Garden* Clara makes Revere think that Swan, actually Lowry's biological child, is his son. Revere thus becomes the child's legitimate father and also a social father. Corroborating Rich's interpretation of legitimacy as an expression of the male need to assert his procreative potential, he even stares at the boy "as if trying to locate himself in there" (*Garden* 259).

Finally, some fathers are exclusively biological fathers: in *them*, it is not clear whether the biological father of Jules is the late Bernie Malin or Howard Wendall. In any case, Howard becomes his social father. Some other fathers do not exert their roles or fulfil their responsibilities as social fathers, and may thus be labelled non-custodial fathers, as in the case of Lowry from *Garden*. Lowry is Swan's biological father, but he never assumes his role as Swan's legitimate father, which would imply the legal and institutional recognition of his fatherly bond to his son; nor does he participate in any manner in raising the child.

In sum, legitimate and biological fatherhood not always coincide; and so legitimate fathers and biological fathers are not always the same individuals. In nuclear families, the main expectation for the role of the father is maintaining his family and providing for their needs. This complex expectation (at times an obligation too), related to men's ascription to the public sphere, has experienced several historical adjustments.

#### 4.2 WORKING FATHERS: THE GOOD PROVIDER ROLE (GPR)

The traditional nuclear family ascribed the role of the economic provider to the father/husband (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 1). Thus, the so-called “good-provider role” (GPR) is possibly the most common achieved role that fathers are expected to fulfil. In the following paragraphs we shall analyze its occurrence and significance, and how it departs from its expectations.

Jesse Bernard has extensively explored the GPR. He argues that this is not merely a role type: it is also an ideology related to gender expectations. The good-provider is a father/husband whose wife does not have to enter the labor force, because he does so. He spends most of his time working hard for his family in order to provide them with food, shelter, clothes, etc. Its counterpart is the housewife. The role of the good-provider implies legal, religious and other advantages of men over women: the good-provider role makes women vulnerable since it forbids them access to the cash-mediated market, and so deters them from achieving competence and power, making them totally dependent on men (Bernard 258, 261). This total economic dependence is seen in *Garden* after Clara abandons her job; in *Wonderland* in the Pedersen and the Vogel household; in *them* after Loretta gets married; and in *Bird*, where Lucille is a housewife, just like Arlette from *Carthage*. In general, though, most of these wives are not totally dependent on their husbands, since they have jobs or their own economic resources: Nada is a successful writer; Mrs. Pedersen has her own fortune, even if her husband controls the family finances; Helene had worked for the first years of her marriage to Jesse; and Loretta maintains her family for many years after her first husband dies.

Usually, the GPR is not a faithful reflection of reality; but it has served to justify, on ideological bases, the power and authority of the father over the family, which was granted to him by the patriarchal system: it is not a coincidence that the literal meaning of patriarchy is “rule by the father.” The dominance that these figures exert is partly based on their prevalence as the sole breadwinners of a family, which has in turn invested them with the power of decision-making. As Hearn points out, this is not the only mechanism for male’s domination, as seen in the corpus: economic advantage is accompanied by an

interconnected web of factors, namely: dominant sexuality, violence, social privilege, and political power more generally (249). For instance, in *Wonderland*, Dr. Pedersen uses violence and dominant sexuality to submit his wealthy wife and Revere's high social position stands in sharp contrast to Clara's impoverish background in *Garden*. In general, as we shall see, the fathers from the corpus employ violence to govern their families.

Within the good-provider ideology, Bernard argues, self-esteem and maleness are measured by the productive role of these men, and by the purchasing power associated with it. As a consequence, being unable to reach work success and earning a corresponding high salary is considered a failure when meeting the standards as men (261-262). The psychic costs of this failure may be high, as Brenton argues:

By depending so heavily on his breadwinning role to validate his sense of himself as a man, instead of also letting his roles as husband, father, and citizen of the community count as validating sources, the American male treads on psychically dangerous ground. It's always dangerous to put all of one's psychic eggs into one basket. (qtd. in Bernard 261)

This is clearly perceived in the corpus, where some male characters are ashamed of not having a job or having a low salary. In *Mulvaneys*, for instance, a jobless and nearly destitute Michael is embarrassed to accept money from his older son, and insists that it is only a loan, not a gift.

Conversely, performing aptly as breadwinners is rewarding for men: they achieve great satisfaction from it, and it gives them status in the family and the community. As Komarovsky notes, every purchase of the family is a symbol of the family's dependence upon the breadwinner (qtd. in Bernard 262). In *Expensive*, most male characters support their families through their well-paid jobs while women stay at home. The ego of these male characters seems to be almost exclusively dependent on their salaries, as seen by the constant obsession of these men with discussing their jobs: their status depends on having a well-paid job. Wealth needs to be visible and advertised in the form of houses, cars, gardens, social gatherings, etc. This display of goods

validates the family as members of their community and grants them access to its privileges.

According to the good-provider ideology, then, the fact that a wife has to enter the labor force is humiliating; and it is even worse if she earns more money than her husband, since it is considered that a wife's earning capacity diminishes a man's position as head of a household (Bernard 261). Oates recreates this situation in *Gravedigger's*, where Tignor is furious at his wife Rebecca when she starts working at a factory to support their son. He had promised her that she should never need to work again, and feels offended since he understands her entering the labor force as an insult to his virility: "Like I ain't doing a damn good job. All the thanks I get. [j] Always wanting money, eh? Like I don't provide enough" (*Gravedigger's* 327). He also tries to alleviate the offense by commenting on her low salary scornfully. The situation becomes even more tense on his part when he becomes jobless.

According to the GPR ideology, men obtain tender care from their wives but they are not required to return it. The drawback of this is, paradoxically, that emotional self-expression is not available for these men (Bernard 260). For instance, Carleton Walpole hides his worries about his wife Pearl when she gives birth while on the road: "He did not want to show much concern for her in front of the other women" (*Garden* 9). This takes a great emotional burden on these characters. As we shall see, this inability to express themselves is partly related to the silence that a considerable number of these men exhibit, a silence that at times is transmitted onto the next generation.

Roles are never static, and the good-provider role is not an exception. By examining all the shifts that it has undergone, we might check its relation to the changes in the family. The GPR appeared in the transition from subsistence to market economies that accelerated with the industrial revolution (Bernard 258-259). According to Stier and Tienda, in preindustrial time, all family members contributed to subsistence activities, but men were family heads and the dominant source of authority within the household. They were considered the primary providers since they were credited with their wives' and children's work (107).



The industrial revolution strengthened the dichotomy of roles for husband and wife in the family, and so, the “good provider” became a synonym for masculinity (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 4). The role of the father as the family provider, Hobson and Morgan assert, appeared in the wake of the Industrial Revolution as fathers were removed from the practical work of the household. But this was not an accurate reflection of reality: many working-class men did not marry, and those who did also enlisted their wives and children to contribute to the home economy. Actually, in the United States, the prevalence of men as a family’s sole breadwinner lasted for a short period, namely, the 1950s; and not even in every type of family: among non-white families, it was seldom the case. By the 1980s and 1990s, women employment rose along with high rates of male unemployment or underemployment (6). Therefore, even from its very appearance, the GPR was not consistently exerted.

The Great Depression of the 1930s, when thousands of persons were in real need (there were nine million jobless people in 1934) (Garraty 744), revealed the drawbacks of an ideology that kept the whole family’s economy dependent upon just one individual. The loss of the good-provider role implied not only the loss of income and prestige for the men, but also that families hung from a thin thread (Bernard 262). As Friedman notes, Carleton from *Garden*, Grandpa Vogel and Willard from *Wonderland*, and Grandpa Joseph Hurley from *Childwold* are victims of the Depression in this sense (Joyce 167).

Indeed, *Garden* portrays how men felt responsible for this situation:

they all felt they must explain themselves and why they were so poor, so shabby. There had been a good time once but now it was finished. Their fathers had lost their land. Farms, money, cattle, crops lost. Now they worked for other people, the sons of these old, lost fathers, in granaries or planning mills or in big successful farms that hadn’t been washed away in the Depression. (*Garden* 149)

Carleton sees how the rules he learnt during his childhood regarding men’s economic independence and honor do no longer apply, because

then, “men did not borrow money and shame their families. But those things happened. Everything changed” (*Garden* 21). Carleton himself owes a large sum of money to his family. These hard times prompt him to look back upon the past with nostalgia, as if it were still a dream that could become real once more.

Creighton explains how temporal disconnection has plagued the lives of these men: Carleton longs for his dead father and the life he had before inexplicable events turned him into a migrant worker. He wishes to recapture his past or at least infuse some meaningful connection to it. Like Carleton, Lowry is also oppressively alienated and displaced: his family were impoverished farm workers. He has a restless intellect that makes him dissatisfied with an ordinary life-experience; and, unlike Carleton, he breaks out of his depressive state by cutting all bonds with his family. Finally, while Carleton painfully felt the expulsion from the garden of the title, Lowry tried to replace it by fully embracing consciousness and experience (*Joyce* 49-50).

In contrast with Carleton, Lowry is not concerned at all about the GPR: even after having endured the same penurious deprived situation as Carleton, he reacts in quite a different manner, and takes the opportunity to live a rootless and carefree life with no responsibilities, doing whichever he fancies to do. His break with his past appears to be complete, for he rarely mentions it.

Instead, Carleton has absorbed and internalized the ideology of the GPR, and feels that he is currently failing to successfully meet the main expectative of the role: providing for his Self-Created Family System so that his wife does not need to enter the labor force. In this case, all the family is forced to work. Carleton assumes this with resignation; and feels comfort in the fact that he is gradually paying his debts, which somehow restores his lost dignity, linked to his virility. But it is difficult for him to assume his failure as a good-provider in the eyes of his Family System of Origin, who probably has contributed to infuse the GPR ideology into his mental schemes and system of self-validation. As a result of his impoverishment, he feels inadequate as a member of his Family System of Origin, and this is the reason why he looks upon the past times with nostalgia. The fact that he longs for his admittedly impassive and unemotional father (who had paid little heed to his

grandchildren) indicates that he would wish to validate his position as an adequate man and father in front of him.

Therefore, during the Great Depression, many Americans had to get used to a new way of living: “nothing was the way it should be, nothing came along right, everything was changed” (*Garden* 21). Many families, such as the Walpoles, started working as seasonal workers with no fixed residence. This situation of intense destitution, however, redefined to a certain extent the power equilibrium of the family unit: both men and women had to work and this gave them a more balanced status. In *Garden*, Carleton, always obsessed with money as a symptom of success, boasts of the money the family as a whole earns: “we bring in more money than you and your fat wife” (*Garden* 36), he tells one of his acquaintances. This also proves how the role of the father/husband as the sole provider had been destroyed for most of these families.

As Bernard affirms, during the Depression and in its aftermath, a set of programs were designed to mitigate poverty. Unemployment insurance was incorporated into the Social Security act of 1935. The good-provider role lingered on until World War II, when it was challenged by the incorporation of women into the labor force. This had a great impact on the roles of men and women: it diluted the prerogatives of the good-provider role and increased the demands made upon him, since he was required to make a greater emotional investment in the family and more sharing of household activities. However, the challenge was slowed down in the 1950s, a decade that promoted the values of the good-provider, houses in the suburbs, home-lover wives and having several children (Bernard 262-263, 265). This era is portrayed, not so idealistically, in Oates’s novel *Must*, as a time of nuclear paranoia and communist panic which take their toll on the characters and their family relationships. The intersection of this paranoia and the GPR is reflected in the obsession of the father/husband Lyle for building a nuclear shelter for his family: his priority is protecting the family from a nuclear holocaust that he considers imminent, to the extent that he ignores the resentfulness he feels toward his half-brother, along with his own pride, in order to ask him for money.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, decades of great social changes when a single salary was often insufficient to maintain a family, the role was questioned even further (Bernard 265). In fact, according to Ehrenreich, it was during the 1960s when the role ceased to dominate family ideology. At this time, men began to retreat from their instrumental family roles. This retreat was manifested in two extreme ways. First, some men increased their family responsibilities by taking more active roles in child rearing and household duties; and second, some other men greatly diminished their involvement in domestic and parenting roles, a dichotomy we shall soon explain (qtd. in Stier and Tienda 108). This finds manifestation in the corpus, since the fathers become more involved with their children as time goes on, although they do not assume more household responsibilities.

According to Herman, the idea of involving men more in child rearing may sound simple but it is extremely radical to most people living in the West, who would reject it (qtd. in De Zulueta 282). However, expectations of what is appropriate for men are changing, as shown by the media, where representations of men committed to children are becoming more frequent (White and Woollett 16).

This evolution is reflected in the corpus, where fathers show an increasing interest in their children, which can be traced chronologically: during the 1920s and 1930s, Carleton scarcely cared about his offspring, except for Clara, his favorite child. Fatherly interest increases somewhat in the 1950s and 1960s as shown by Elwood Everett and Michael Mulvaney. In the 1980s, the corpus shows that the role has definitely changed in the emotional terrain, as proved by Delray Kruller's tokens of affection toward his family in *Bird*, despite the fact that it is hard for him to express his feelings since he was raised up in a traditional community that emphasized models of imperturbable masculinity. Delray comes to represent a rather traditional father who nonetheless worries about his children. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Zeno from *Carthage* becomes the father who most consistently and determinedly cares for and nurtures his children, as shown when his daughter Cressida disappears.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, men were found to experience more positive and less negative emotion at home than at

work. However, some men feel the strain of trying to be the fathers they want to be, because this is often at odds with the obligations of their role as breadwinners and societal expectations of masculinity (Brannon 195). However, Zeno seems to have found a balance between being both the main breadwinner and enacting the fatherhood he wishes to. In recent years, there are growing numbers of dual-career marriages, and the father cannot be considered the sole provider of a family, proving once more that this was rarely the case. Fathers have also become more involved in housework and child rearing, but still to a lesser extent than women (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 4-5).

There are new demands made upon the role nowadays: good-providers are expected to display more intimacy, expressivity and nurturance; and to share household and child rearing duties. Moreover, both men and women are starting to repudiate the lack of affectivity attached to the role. Besides, women are now entering the labor force in great number, and only a small percentage of them are full-time housewives (Bernard 268-269).

This has several consequences, as Bernard affirms. First, some men have welcomed the relief from the strain of the sole responsibility of the provider role, while some others perceive the change as degradation, similarly to men's reactions during the Great Depression; some may even experience some trauma from it. Second, some men reject the restrictions of the good-provider role on ideological grounds, and others reject it because they refuse to assume its obligations. Third, yet another group of men stands in a middle ground: they become disillusioned with their jobs, and feel that they have neglected old friends and interests for the sake of their jobs. Some of them decide to change their career, but this usually results in a lower income and a negative impact on the family (Bernard 268-270).

Stier and Tienda argue that two extreme styles of modern parenthood emerge from all these changes: some fathers become more involved in child rearing and extend their roles beyond that of breadwinners; while other fathers deny responsibility for their children and refuse to support them. Many researches argue that men in general and minority men in particular are retreating from the family. The growing number of parents who fail to provide support for noncustodial

children is problematic since it results in economic and emotional deprivation. Of course, it is important to analyze each specific case to see why the fathers fail to do so (108). In the corpus, fathers seem to have extended their roles beyond breadwinners instead of retreating from the family. Zeno is a good example of nurturing father who also earns a living for his family.

The GPR can be understood as the main manifestation of the social expectations affecting fathers in the patriarchal tradition, thus somehow corroborating Hearn's interpretation of fatherhood as a social center of dominance. However, Hearn also explains that these social realities should not be seen, a priori, as solid, unified or singular. More usually, they are multiple, dispersed and sites of contradiction (245), a reality which finds expression in the different approaches to the GPR and the multiplicity of its effects as recreated in Oates's novels.

According to Bernard, there are four different ways to perform the role of the good-provider. First, some men resent the burdens that the GPR imposes upon them, and may, for instance, keep complete control over all the family's expenditures; or rather punish their families for being forced to perform that role. They consider that the money they make is exclusively theirs, so they can do whatever they please with it (Bernard 262). This is exactly what Carleton considers: "Carleton always saved out three or four dollars that he put in his pocket safe from Pearl or anybody else, no matter how much money they needed, and with this he was able to spend one night drinking" (*Garden* 13). Due to their resentment, other men make the family pay emotionally for the provisions they supplied (Bernard 262). In *Wonderland*, Dr. Pedersen expects the family to be grateful to him and to submit to his will as the head of the family and the only breadwinner; despite the fact that his wife has her own money, Dr. Pedersen is the one to control it.

The second group is resented because they feel that they have been taken for granted, and wish more appreciation for the life-style they provide (Bernard 267). Elwood, from *Expensive*, appears to feel aggrieved since he perceives that his family is not grateful enough for the high standard of living he provides them with. A third group of men is highly competitive and tries to buy their families off with expensive commodities in order to show their status. Sometimes they even

sacrifice the families they are supposedly providing for to the achievements that make it possible (Bernard 262). This does not appear in the corpus. A fourth group of men really wants to perform the role successfully, but is unable to do so for some reason (Bernard 264). The best example of this is Howard from *them*, as we shall see.

Of course, Bernard warns, traditionally not everybody was ready to conform to the GPR. There are two basic groups among these men. First, men who could not live up to the norms of the good-provider or did not wish to. During the nineteenth century, the figure of the “tramp” emerged. These men were forced to or decided to abandon the good-provider role completely, and did not work but only did small chores. Some of them became homeless; and as the country became urbanized, they landed on the slums. When tramps became utterly demoralized, chronic alcoholics and unreachable, they fall into a different category: “bums.” The main difference between tramps and bums is that the former are still integrated, even if feebly and sporadically, into the labor force; while the latter are totally detached from the labor force, and socially marginalized (263-264). In *Garden*, Carleton despises some men who work in his crew by referring to them precisely as “bums” and states that they have not come from a farm like he did. So even if they are exactly in the same impoverished situation, he still feels superior to them because his family was able to earn their living through their work: he wants to reaffirm his role as a provider, even if he is not the only provider of the family.

Although *Bird* is set much later, in the 1980s, Delray becomes a bum: he abandons his son and leaves their town, giving himself to his heavy drinking habit. In *Mulvaneys*, Michael becomes a tramp when he leaves his family and comes to live alone, also turning to drink.

### **4.3 FATHER-CHILDREN SUBSYSTEM**

In the corpus, fathers are generally associated with a patriarchal society, and perceived as the norm, the monologic authority, the ones with legitimized and visible sexuality, etc. Lozano Estivalis explains in clear terms how such a society is established by means of three steps. First, the creation of an ideology by those who are going to make a benefit from it; second, the exaltation of those who create it, along with the

devaluation of those others who are outside the alliance or pact; and third, the removal of the two previous steps to eliminate any proof of their existence. As a result, what is artificial appears as natural, spontaneous, as the real origin. In a patriarchal society, women are prevented from exerting maternity on their own terms, and thus, this experience becomes necessary but devaluated, and prevented from gaining access to the social and political world of the fathers. This ideology is composed by the order of the Father as the only one, as that who rules alone, who does not know, and does not wish to know, how to share. The Father exhibits an unsolved envy of women, and thus, the devaluation of the mother is at the core of its operations center (Lozano Estivalis 10-11). This envy is also central in our analysis, because it is strongly related to the idea of the monogenetic conception of men.

Moreover, for many centuries, as Hearn asserts, fatherhood was assumed as a biological fact; as a part of the social institution of marriage (which was taken for granted); and as part of the definition of the “head of the household,” while simultaneously reinforced by legal, quasi-legal or communal practices. While fatherhood concerns the relations of specific men with specific children, it is historically difficult to separate it from marriage arrangements and gender relations. In other words, the constitution of fathers often occurs in the context of marriage and marriage-type relationships (254, 256). In fact, this bond is often presented in the corpus, in the figure of a father/husband who imposes his rule over his family, as seen in Carleton Walpole, Willard Harte, Jesse Vogel and Michael Mulvaney, among others.

This association of fatherhood-gender-marriage is often related to the execution of violence within the family, Hearn goes on. Until recently, the state condoned men’s violence to women, and this is important to understand how men’s (often husband’s and father’s) violence was accepted, normalized and ignored by individuals and institutions, and generally seen as a private matter (256). Again, we perceive this in the corpus: fathers exert their will and rules by means of violence. We shall analyze how this occurs in the present section.

According to Fiona Williams, there has been a historical shift from fathers having automatic rights to fathers having both rights and duties; but generally speaking, fathers are still dominantly defined in terms of



rights in relation to women and children, whereas mothers continue to be defined through the notion of responsibility (qtd. in Hearn 255). Indeed, we have already commented how the submissive constructions of motherhood are justified on the basis that children need their mothers because they are better suited than anyone else to take care of them; whereas fatherhood is attached to notions of control over the family.

According to Hearn, contemporary constructions of fatherhood and fathers are far from stable: they involve diversification and increasing contradictions, including paternity; birth registration; legal and social sanctioning of patriarchal property; ownership and control; state intervention against father's violence; the separation of the "social" and "biological" in the construction of fathers, and thus the notion of "social fatherhood" through fostering, adoption, and stepfatherhood; changing relationships of cash, care and responsibility; and state sponsorship of "family planning;" as well as involvement of fathers in childbirth and children's education (255).

The corpus contains a clear preponderance of fathers who adhere to a traditional and rigid conception of authoritarian fatherhood that eventually distorts their relationship with their families. These fathers are abundant in the initial stages of Oates writing. As Rich argues, these traditional fathers have deserted their children, even if they live under the same roof (211), as we clearly see in *Mulvaneys*. Fathers who adhere to an extremely authoritarian style often find difficulties in trying to adapt to challenges they encounter, or to alterations of the family structure. As a result, the traditional patriarchal role of the father is increasingly deteriorated through the twentieth century, as clearly perceived in the corpus.

In Oates, the gradual decline of the traditional fathers is accompanied by a wider pattern of the waning hegemonic masculinity, which, as Friedman notices, is embodied by Jerome Corcoran "Corky" from *What I Lived For*.<sup>26</sup> Corky is a minor state politician who works at real estate and deludes himself by thinking he has sexual power over women ("Feminism" 486). Oates comments that he does not represent all men, "but he is close to being an 'average' man in many respects [j] a very masculine man. Some would say a chauvinist, a male

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<sup>26</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Lived*.

chauvinist pig, vey macho, but I think that's the way many men are, and I don't judge them" (qtd. in Friedman "Feminism" 486).

In fact, Corky's portrait is certainly complex and not reductive to a parody of a "misogynistic pig," since he is able, at times, to objectively assess his behavior and realize how ridiculous it is. He goes on, however, to behave like that, because he has assumed these "manly" mannerisms as part of his identity for all his life. As Friedman explains, traditional ideas of masculinity are then not exactly abandoned in the novel; but they are part of a plurality of masculinities resulting in a substantial loss of authority for the traditional model ("Feminism" 486). For Corky, retaining his hegemonic masculinity becomes intricate because as Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee argue, "the conditions for its realization are constantly changing, and, most importantly, there is resistance from the groups being subordinated" (qtd. in Friedman "Feminism" 487). And so Corky's hyperbolic masculinity mostly fails (Friedman "Feminism" 486-487).

Consequently, Oatesian male characters, specially fathers, have been progressively displaced from their positions of monologic power, that is, from their positions as the ultimate rulers of their families. These characters find many difficulties in assuming their displacement or vanishment either from their traditional role in the family or from the family group, and this has an undeniable effect for the whole family: in the early novels, the consequences are often catastrophic and result in the destruction of the family unit; but in later novels, the families survive the absence or loss of power of the father with increasing efficiency.

The transformations of the family circle are easily accepted, for instance, in *Missing Mom*<sup>27</sup> (2005), where as Friedman perceives, the Oedipal family of the novel is disassembled from the beginning: the father is already dead and the mother is murdered. One of the daughters, Nikki, is the narrator. Her year of mourning for her mother is also a year of maturation: she is transformed from a punk-like rebel loner into a woman who allows herself to be loved by a man willing to nurture her. In this year, she inhabits her mother's house, which comes as a trope for the legacy she has chosen to accept. The transformation is quotidian

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<sup>27</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Missing*.

and unremarkable, but quite extraordinary in the context of Oates's gender binaries and waning Oedipal narrative. It is not the father's house which necessarily makes families and nations possible, and it is not men who follow an imperious masculinity who are necessary for a proper marriage, culture or nation. As in "Faithless," the narrator here is a writer, a journalist who tries to capture her historical moment (Friedman "Feminism" 491-492). Thus, we see a movement in Oates fiction from the loss of the father leading to trauma and destruction to its leading to a peaceful reconfiguration of the family unit.

We shall see, then, how some of these conflicts are addressed in the corpus in the specific context of the father-children subsystem. First of all, before individually discussing the relations of father to daughters and to sons, this section considers from a general perspective fathers' relationship to children during their initial years of life.

#### **4.3.1 Pregnancy and Babyhood**

When having children, men's lives and bodies are transformed to a lesser extent than women lives are. Men are generally less involved in parenthood and usually keep more social contacts and activities outside the house, which are largely provided by their work. Fathers' contribution to childcare is reduced over the course of the first year, leaving mothers with greater responsibility. As a result, mothers feel more confident and competent in their ability to care for the child (White and Woollett 16, 25-26). The corpus reflects this trend. For example, in *Garden*, Revere, despite already having three children, is shy toward Clara's baby. It becomes obvious that he did not take care of his other sons, as Clara notices: "She could tell that Revere didn't know how to hold a baby or how to feed him, it was just a nuisance to have him around, but she kept quiet about how she felt" (*Garden* 221). Clara does not say anything to Revere because she is not surprised about his incompetence with his present (and most possibly, past) experiences with babies.

During their partner's pregnancy, men also have to make adjustments of their own, since it might change the way in which they see themselves. Many of them often start to perceive themselves as more mature and responsible, and sense that their lives are fuller. Some

may worry or feel panic regarding their new obligations, the relation they may have with the baby, or the costs the child will cause. A study by M. Lewis and C. Feiring exposed in their article “Some American Families at Dinner” (1984) found that most men consider that their partner’s pregnancy has brought them closer to their partners (qtd. in White and Woollett 18). Others thought that the child would represent an interruption in their lives and plans (White and Woollett 20). Therefore, some children come as a source of anguish for their fathers due to factors as harsh live conditions or personal inclinations, as in the case of Carleton from *Garden* and Willard from *Wonderland*. Both of them suffer the effects of the Great Depression.

The Walpoles experience this crisis directly, during the 1930s. They live a nomad lifestyle in which all the members of the family work, making the raising of a child quite complicated: Carleton is comprehensibly worried about his growing family, his wife Pearl’s pregnancy and the unhealthy conditions they endure, especially because she had dangerous labors before: “he did not care about the baby. It did not exist, it wasn’t real. Pearl’s screams were the only real thing” (*Garden* 17). His thoughts might derive from his anguish about Pearl’s delicate health, as well as from his inability to visualize a baby (Clara) who has not been born yet. Not casually, the novel opens with the birth of Clara on the road, a convenient symbol for the strong position that the question of mobility will have in the text.

In *Wonderland*, the effects of the Great Depression are shown in the next decade, at the beginning of the 1940s: at this point, the United States had not yet entered the Second World War, which would imply a dramatic decrease in the rates of unemployment. In the novel, though, the Harte family suffers a constraining economic situation after the failure of several business started by Willard. Besides, Nancy’s unexpected pregnancy becomes a major stressing factor for him. Indeed, the family situation is extremely constricted, since they are a large family living in a small and battered house. Willard, raised during the harsh years of the Depression, is unable to accept this new pregnancy that will make their lives more complicated, so he tries to destroy the whole family, and with the exception of Jesse, he succeeds. Willard cannot deal with his inability to provide for his family, and thus

decides to totally destroy it, erasing not only his role as the father but the role of the mother/wife and the children/siblings. He feels entitled to murder them due to his adherence to patriarchal violence. On the contrary, other parents, like Michael Mulvaney, gladly expect the birth of their children, which make them feel closer to their partner.

Fathers have more interest in children as they get older and more competent. They have a rather high interest in childcare when the newborn comes home, but this falls dramatically as they return to work from their paternity leave (White and Woollett 63). In *Garden*, Revere expresses more interest for Swan as he grows up. In fact, he did not even know how to treat him while he was a baby, despite already having three other sons. But as Swan grows up, he is more interested in him, and similarly, he assumes a more active role in his education.

#### **4.3.2 Father-Daughter Subsystem**

The main goal of the GPR is maintaining the father's authority over his family, securing their submission and obedience to him. However, diverse events in the novels from the corpus become a threat to the position of the good-provider. These fathers are obsessed with their ideals of traditional nuclear families and their traditional role as fathers which involve being both rulers and protectors of their relatives. However, the rigidity of the role prevents these men from adapting to drastic changes in the family structure. In this section, we shall focus on these transformations, particularly, the ones that their daughters undergo during adolescence; and the transformations of their model of family, which often causes the father to react with violence, as we shall see in this section in the novels *Garden*, *them*, *Mulvaneys*, *Bird* and *Wonderland*.

A high number of fathers from the corpus, namely, Carleton, Michael and Edward in *Garden*, *Mulvaneys* and *Bird*, show preference for their daughters Clara, Marianne and Krista over their sons. In *Wonderland* Jesse has two daughters, but he has a clear preference for his youngest child Shelley. These fathers specifically assert that the girls are the apple of their eyes.

However, in all these cases, the relationships end abruptly and violently during the girls' adolescence due to the fathers' inability to

adapt to the changing circumstances of family life and the transformation of their teenage daughters. As we shall explain, this is part of what Daly refers to as the daughter's sacrifice to the destructive father, which is realized in different manners in the novels: in *Garden*, Carleton assaults his daughter for spending the night away from home and going to a tavern; in *Mulvaney's*, Marianne is sent to live with a relative after being raped because her father cannot face the trauma it entails; in *Bird*, Edward abducts Krista to try to force his ex-wife to talk to him; and in *Wonderland*, Jesse's stalking of his daughter causes her to run away from home, become ill and, in the original version, die. All these violent occurrences destroy the relationship of the daughters with their fathers. In *them*, the relation father-daughter between Maureen and Furlong ends equally violently, although their subsystem, unlike the others, did not present such stated closeness.

Accordingly, in contrast with boys, young girls are described as having a closer relationship with their fathers. The fathers exhibit a strong social-emotional attitude of nurturance during their daughters' childhood, and tend to be over-protective of them, an attitude that is in line with historical trends that consider women as the property of their fathers, and later, of their husbands (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 70). This consideration lies at the root of Carleton's and Michael's eventual rejection of their daughters: they are both reluctant to assume the girls' sexual initiation because they consider their daughters as their possession. Jesse experiences sometimes similar: along with his incestuous perusal of his daughter, he cannot assume the idea that she might become sexually active, but instead of forsaking her, he tries to prevent her sexual initiation by supervising and stalking her to unhealthy extremes.

Keeping daughters under their fathers' control, Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke argue, conveys the psychological message that a girl needs her father's protection. Some fathers reward the compliance of their daughters, and some daughters tend to fit this pattern: they have a strong need for their fathers' approval and do not follow an independent track (72, 79). Krista and Marianne show attitudes of eager obedience for their fathers, to the extent that they forgive them (especially Marianne) even when they are abandoned by them. Thus, following a

totally dependent path could have been Krista's destiny had her father not been murdered by the police. Marianne's attachment to her father could also have led her to blindly follow his designs had he not rejected her. The shock of this rebuff is so deep that Marianne will not fully recover from it until she is, apparently, reconciled with him at his deathbed.

Alternatively, other dependent daughters value achievement in the "new" men in their lives, namely, their husbands and sons. These women indicate that they "belong" to a different man by adopting his surname (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 73), although this is a common practice in Anglo-Saxon countries. This appears to be Clara's case: she exchanges the control of her father over her life for that of her lover, and then her husband. However, even if she does not have complete control, she has not totally renounced to exert a small portion of power: even after marrying a socially respectable man, Clara does not fully assume his surname, and at times insists on being called by her maiden surname. In any case, the effect of men on her life is obvious: the titles of the three sections of the book are Carleton, Lowry and Swan, her father, lover and son, respectively. Although she is the protagonist, she has no section named after her, which suggests that despite her appropriation of the rituals of the patriarchal society to her socioeconomic advantage, as a woman, she remains trapped by its constraints. In some cases, this dependent relationship leads to an affective and sexual distortion when the daughter appears to develop romantic or erotic feelings for her father, as in the case of *Bird*, as we shall explain in its corresponding section.

#### 4.3.2.1 The Eruption of Violence

In the novels *Garden, them, Mulvaneys, Bird* and *Wonderland*, the fathers are unable and unwilling to accept and adapt to the transformations that their daughters undergo during their adolescence. This is caused by the fathers' obsession with the ideal of the nuclear family. These men cling to their traditional role of protective, authoritarian, good-provider fathers in such an extreme manner that they exclude the possibility of adapting to possible alterations in their family structure; or either to the physiological, social and emotional

changes that their daughters undergo, as well as the potential losses that these changes may bring. As a result, they exert violence of some kind over their daughters, placing them at great danger: Clara and Maureen are physically assaulted by their father and stepfather respectively; Marianne is forsaken by her father, Krista is abducted by her father, and Shelley is stalked by her father. All these occurrences qualify as violence as previously defined by Bachman: acts that are physically and emotionally harmful or that carry the potential to cause physical harm (108).

Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke's (76) describe a development in the father-daughter relationships that perfectly fits the previously cited cases. While the daughters are in their childhood, most of the father-daughter relationships are imbued with love, kindness and complicity. *them* would be an exception to this, because Furlong does not know Maureen since childhood. This general pattern changes during the daughters' adolescence, a period when the relation with the parents needs to be reevaluated. *Wonderland* is an exception here to a certain extent, since Jesse starts to manifest incestuous pulls for Shelley while she is a child, thus distorting their bond from an early stage.

Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke argue that this process of adaptation occurs differently from the process affecting son-parent relations, naming three specific differences. First, as anticipated, the daughters' sexuality becomes an issue for parents, more than the sons' sexuality, as perceived in Michael's reaction to Marianne's rape, in Carleton's and Furlong's brutal punishment of Clara and Maureen for being considered sexually active or promiscuous, and in Jesse's unbearable persecution of Shelley in order to "protect" her.

Second, parents are less willing to grant autonomy to their daughters than to their sons. Both Clara's father and Maureen's stepfather try to restrict their movements by violently punishing them; and Jesse makes enormous efforts to make sure that Shelley stays home, to the extent that he becomes a sort of stalker. Besides, Maureen's whereabouts are much more closely controlled than those of her brother Jules; and she, unlike him, is not allowed to work. Krista's mother is also worried about her whereabouts but this is a different situation because her husband has an order of restraint against his family.



Finally, the individuation process is more complex for girls than for boys: girls need to negotiate the inclination to be engulfed in extremely dependent relationships with their parents and the developmental task of individuation. This proves to be the most difficult aspect of the process of maturation for these girls: in all these cases, they need to undergo a drastic turning point in their lives in order to attain a sense of individuation. Consequently, Clara and Shelley run away to escape from their fathers' violent imposition of limits to their freedom, Marianne unwillingly breaks the bond with her father when he forsakes her, Maureen undergoes a comatose state in bed for thirteen months, and Krista is only liberated from her father's increasingly endangering presence after he is killed.

Thus, the turbulence arises in the mostly previously placid relationships between father and daughter in these novels, erupting in episodes of violence and abandonment during the girls' adolescence. First, in *Garden*, Carleton physically attacks his daughter as a punishment for going out at night. Second, in *them*, Maureen's stepfather Furlong beats her after he learns that she has been prostituting herself. Third, in *Mulvaney's*, Michael forces his raped daughter to abandon the family house due to his inability to assume the trauma ensuing from the rape. Fourth, Edward abducts his daughter Krista in *Bird* to force his ex-wife to talk to him. Fifth, in *Wonderland*, after Jesse indirectly forces Shelley to run away from him, he chases her throughout the country and eventually finds her moribund in Canada.

All these episodes take place after what is, or is perceived to be, a major change in the girls' lives or their own lives; and this brings to mind Daly's observation that violence commonly arises in Oates when the imagination fails, when the characters are unable to place themselves in the position of others (27). In fact, Daly perceives this theme through most of the *Wonderland* Quartet. According to her, by historicizing old myths, Oates links them to specific periods in order to criticize them. Her early novels often start with the Great Depression and end with the violence of the 1960s. *Garden* features a parricide-suicide in its last pages; *Expensive* concludes with the promise of the narrator's suicide, and in *them*, the violence concludes with the Detroit riots, the tragic consequence of three generations of socioeconomic

inequality in the country. These are not meaningless and isolated acts of violence, but the result of a collective failure of the imagination, the failure to see “them” as “us” (27).

In this specific case, the failure of the imagination is linked to the capacity to love unconditionally. As Oates writes in the short story “Unpublished Fragments” from the collection *Goodness*, “love was not possible unless people imagined one another fully, ceaselessly, unselfishly” (*Goodness* 357). This is a central idea for our corpus, which suggests that, ideally, love for another person should have a fluid nature and be ready to constantly imagine and reimagine the love object as it develops and undergoes life changes. Love objects should then not be forced to fit a pre-conceived rigid notion that the self has of them, since this will only bring pain and disruption, as it occurs in the corpus. This concept is somehow similar to Abraham and Torok’s idea of introjection that we shall soon present.

As a result, in *Garden*, Carleton is deeply hurt about his adolescent daughter’s negotiation of her independence by staying away from home for one night. In both *them* and *Mulvaneys*, the girls are punished for not behaving chastely according to their fathers’ standards. In *Wonderland*, Jesse presents a mixture of all these motivations. In *Bird*, although the father’s main conflict is not so centered on his daughter but on the unexpected loss of his role as father/husband, it is clear that Edward is unable to see his daughter as a teenager and not a child.

In any case, Carleton, Furlong and Edward resort to violence, not having, or not wishing to acquire, any other tools to face these crises. The exceptions will be Michael and Jesse, who do not actually put their daughters in danger in a direct manner, but harm them through indirect means. These men wish to have rigid father-daughter subsystems, whereas most of the girls would rather have an open subsystem in which self-expression and negotiation are allowed. It is not a coincidence that all of the daughters are teenagers: they are living through a phase of major changes they need to incorporate in their lives. Despite this, their reaction to their fathers’ demands varies, as we shall see by examining these processes in greater detail.

On a wider specter, we shall consider as well the global repercussions that the fathers’ behavior causes for the rest of the family;

that is, whether the family survives or not the damaging actions of their domineering fathers/husbands. To begin with, we shall focus on the physical assaults that Carleton and Furlong commit against Clara and Maureen. These cases belong to the general label of child abuse. We have chosen the term “abuse” instead of “violence” because it emphasizes the difference of power between an adult abuser and a young victim. We have included under this category acts against adolescents as victims, since most authors do not make the distinction between them and children. Specifically, we are focusing on physical child abuse, in this case committed within the family circle.

#### 4.3.2.2 Physical Child Abuse (PCA)

Both *Garden* and *them* feature brutal physical assaults from fathers to daughters which represent a major turning point in the lives of all these characters, and thus shall be profoundly analyzed. Before discussing the details of every particular attack, we shall present some theoretical considerations regarding physical child abuse or PCA.

Barnett et al. comment on the difficulties of classifying PCA at times, because acts of violence by adults against children and adolescents range from mild slaps to extremely injurious attacks. A succinct historical approximation is enlightening at this respect: before the 1960s, few of these acts would have been considered abusive. It was precisely during this decade when violence against children received more attention, just as the interest in children protection increased. This evolution is also reflected in the re-evaluation of children by society and their acquisition of a higher esteem and respect, as reflected in the corpus (42-43). In *Garden*, children are of not much significance, perhaps due to the grim environment in which the novel takes place: violence is a rather common occurrence in the community, and PCA comes as a usual method of parental control and punishment of children. Subsequently, the incidence of PCA decreases through the corpus: although spanking methods are still used in *them*, they are mostly absent from *Expensive*, *Wonderland*, *Mulvaney's*, *Bird* and *Carthage*. This tendency is parallel to the evolution of parenting styles, which have become more permissive and less authoritative over time. This does not mean that PCA has completely disappeared; even at the

beginning of the twenty-first century, corporal punishment is still applied to children: 84-97% of all parents in the United States and the United Kingdom still use it (De Zulueta 256).

Another difficulty found when defining PCA, Barnett et al. add, is that some of these acts, such as spanking or slapping, are considered acceptable and legitimized by society. Murray Straus argues that spanking is harmful because it legitimizes violence as a means of solving problems or dealing with frustration and, besides, it has a “cultural spillover” effect, since violence in one sphere of society engenders violence in other spheres, making it acceptable in different situations (43).

Hansen et al. define PCA as an act of commission by the parent, characterized by the presence of nonaccidental injury and infliction of overt physical violence. This abuse usually occurs in low frequency episodes, often accompanied by frustration and anger toward the child. Some acts of physical abuse are: beating, squeezing, burning, lacerating, suffocating, binding, poisoning, exposing to excessive heat or cold, sensory overload (e.g., excessive light, sound, stench, aversive taste), and prevention of sleep (128).

The distinction of PCA as an act of commission is decisive, since it allows its differentiation from acts of omission, that is, acts of neglect, as Gershater-Molko and Lutzker emphasize (158). Neglect is not as prominent in the corpus as PCA, and thus, it shall be described only sporadically. For instance, as commented in the previous chapter, Nada and Helene are somewhat emotionally neglectful of their children by being frequently absent and cold, respectively.

Milner and Crouch list the three main characteristics of perpetrators of PCA: personal traits, family traits, and sociological traits (41-42, 44-48). Within the personal traits, we might consider three factors. First, biological factors are sometimes mentioned, but their role is unclear. Second, cognitive or affective factors: usually, abusers have low self-esteem. Some research indicates that some adults have negative perceptions of their children, including the belief that they are intentionally disruptive, disobedient, or annoying. Moreover, abusive parents have been observed to harbor unrealistic expectations of their children. Third, behavioral traits: for instance, PCA abusers may report

isolation, but this is not always a factor. Similarly, alcohol consumption is only modestly related to child abuse (Milner and Crouch 41, 44-46). Besides, abusive parents are less likely to be involved in parenting, and less physically affectionate (Harden and Koblinsky 79).

Additionally, Starr provides a fourth trait by mentioning some other psychological factors. Spinetta found abusing parents angrier, and afraid of external threat and control (qtd. in Starr 127). Besides, Starr considers that it is likely that the key factor in abuse is the relationship between emotional distress (rather than personality) and maltreatment. It has been suggested that emotionally aroused people tend to be more aggressive. The major psychological determinant in PCA is, in sum, inadequate childrearing attitudes, because child abuse is, by definition, the result of societally labelled deviant childrearing. Most of these parents have, in short, a negative perception of their children (128-129).

The second block of characteristics is formed by the family traits. Harden and Koblinsky attach great importance to the family in such cases of violence, because the family is the ecological level<sup>28</sup> that has a more profound impact on children's development. The first and major developmental milestone of childhood is to have a trusting relationship with a parent or caregiver (79). Consequently, family characteristics have a definite impact over PCA. Moreover, according to Milner and Crouch, abusers report more deprivation, hostility and abuse in their Family System of Origin, as well as less support from parents, adults, siblings and peers in childhood. Furthermore, families where PCA occurs have more family and marital distress, poor or distorted communication patterns; they suffer from role confusion, power imbalances, and distrust; and report less cohesion and expressiveness.

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<sup>28</sup> The ecological model proposes that violence should be examined within a nested set of environmental contexts or systems. Ecological models include the following levels. First, macrosystem, which refers to broader cultural factors, such as patriarchal attitudes and beliefs about gender relations in intimate relationships. Second, exosystem, which refers to informal and formal social networks that connect intimate relationships to broader culture. Third, mycrosystem, which refers to the relationship in which violence takes place. Fourth, ontogenic, which refers to a person's individual development and what such development brings to the above three levels. These levels are flexible and can be modified to fit the researcher's personal style. The disadvantage of the ecological model is that it is almost impossible to test it entirely (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 15).

Some of them value the use of force. Finally, there are child-related factors such as prematurity, low birthweight, physical handicaps, difficult temperament (Milner and Crouch 47-48).

Finally, the third block is composed by sociological characteristics, which comprise the fact that abusers tend to be young, poorly educated, and with a history of observing/receiving abuse; they suffer from environmental stressors (often related to demographic factors such as crowding living environment). Stress increases the likelihood that a parent with limited resources will react in an aggressive manner toward children. At times, abusers live in a violent community. They also often lack economic resources, and show lower educational status, and lower levels of health (Milner and Crouch 45, 48). Harden and Koblinsky add that abusive parents may lack physical or psychological resources to provide protection and nurturance for their children (79).

Milner and Crouch discuss the effects of PCA in children. In early childhood, these children tend to have lower scores in tests of general intellectual abilities. This may be caused by environmental variables that often accompany PCA such as impoverished environment or neglect. In middle childhood, PCA children exhibit affective and behavioral difficulties (anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, self-destructive behavior, low self-esteem, social detachment, hyperactivity, excessive aggression and noncompliance); that is, they have higher emotional and behavioral malfunctions. They might also show symptoms that could be related to PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder), such as reexperiencing, avoidance or numbing, and increased arousal (51-53). Besides, abused children present decreased ability to understand social roles and label feelings, more reality-based fear, greater immaturity and decreased readiness to learn (Starr 138).

In the next sections, we shall examine the PCA episodes of both *Garden* and *them* in the light of these theoretical considerations.

#### 4.3.2.2.1 PCA in A Garden of Earthly Delights

Carleton shows several typical characteristics of PCA perpetrators. Among the usual personal traits, he seems to have a rather low self-esteem, derived from the fact that he feels responsible for the family's deprived situation, which is connected with his frustration over

his inability to correctly perform the GPR. He does not have a negative perception of Clara, but is clearly disappointed in her for being late at night at a tavern, which for him implies that she has lost her virginity: “They want to get up an’ leave, they don’t stay home, they run off — the bitches — just like their mother [...] Bitches don’t love nobody — Clara don’t give a damn, my Clara” (*Garden* 105). With his impulsive words, Carleton establishes thus a line of familial promiscuous behavior that stems from the mother to the daughters. He also alludes to his other daughter, Sharleen, who had run away to get married. He automatically ascribes both girls’ decision to stay away from home with promiscuity, which is typically negatively perceived in women. Thus, Carleton considers that Clara has disobeyed him. The fact that she is his favorite child only increases his hurt and sense of betrayal: possibly, Carleton feels particularly insulted because he has favored Clara over his other children. Since he felt a special mutual affinity between him and his daughter, he tried to avoid repeating the indifferent mode of parenting that his father had exerted with him by showing real affection to Clara, but he still expected blind obedience from her. Her “disobedience” can then be interpreted by him not only as a lack of respect, but also as a sort of snubbing of his privileged treatment. Clara, in turn, feels betrayed by his aggressive reaction, which has no precedents.

Among the behavioral factors, Carleton experiences isolation. In spite of knowing a significant amount of people from work and from socializing often at taverns, he does not appear to have close friends or confidants. Contrary to typical abusers, he is rather affectionate toward Clara; that is, until the moment in which she “challenges” him with her behavior.

Starr’s psychological factors are blatantly present in Carleton: he is prompt to anger, mad at his misfortunes; and, additionally, afraid of external circumstances that escape his control, because he has already been a victim of them. This is a common occurrence in Oates’s early works, as Friedman points out: especially, in Oates’s novels from *Shuddering* to *Wonderland*, in which the individual’s aspirations are constantly thwarted by a universe in which accident dominates (*Joyce* 195). In *Shuddering* this unpredictable world is clearly manifested when Karen Herz runs away from home with her neighbor, the race

driver Shar Rule. Shar argues that he does not know how this occurred, exactly, assuring that “[n]ever had he made any choice about her: she had happened to him as accidents happen to him, immediate and complete” (*Shuddering* 121).

In *Garden*, Carleton is emotionally unbalanced: he cannot healthily express his feelings, as seen during his wife’s delivery, when despite feeling enormously overwhelmed, he stubbornly refuses to cry in front of other people. Perhaps, the constant hiding of his true feelings exacts a great price from him, conveyed in the form of stress. This is, once more, a consequence of his adherence to the GPR, who forbids men to express how they feel. As a result, when his daughter does not comply to his orders, he cannot deal with his frustration any longer, and since he does not possess the appropriate childrearing tools to calmly address the situation, he resorts to violence, a typical response in him during upsetting situations: he initiates or participates in fights with strangers when he feels insulted, in what would qualify as street violence. Therefore, for Carleton, violence is a kind of emotional outlet, and, as Waller observes, a means of self-assertion (*Dreaming* 105). Carleton thus values the use of force as his only means of acquiring some sense of control, of securing a position in a world that, for him, is perpetually moving. Besides, by resorting to violence both at home and outside home, he is conforming to the cultural spillover effect to which Straus alludes.

Family characteristics are crucial in Carleton’s case, since he is the quintessential symbol of the American destitution of the 1930s: he suffers deprivation and hostility in his Family System of Origin, which cannot offer him any economic or emotional support; and his Self-Created Family System shows poor communication skills and expressiveness, as well as a certain degree of distress. It is said that his father did not talk to him, something that had deeply upset him; and Carleton himself does not possess good communication techniques. Role confusion is also present in the family: since she is very young, Clara acquires the role of a caretaker of her siblings, occupying the position of a parent. In this case, child-related factors are reflected in the absence of birth-control methods, which leads to a large number of children who are difficult to provide for. This is an added stress factor



for the family. Carleton is an authoritative father who, if his children misbehave, does not hesitate to physically punish them to the extent of drawing blood: he considers that this is necessary in order to maintain his position as the “boss” of the family. Consequently, his children are afraid of him, including Clara, although she receives a privileged treatment from him.

The concept of family is of the highest relevance for Carleton. As a consequence of the already mentioned historical patterns, he has lost the possibility of having a rooted family and longs to acquire one in the future: he often talks about “going back” to his home state, Kentucky; but ironically, he does not know where it exactly is. This homecoming wish represents a constant motive in the corpus, also reflected in *Mulvaney's*, where Marianne dreams in vain of going back home; and in *Carthage*, where both Cressida and Brett undergo the harsh realities of a real homecoming.

The problem is, as Friedman notices, that Carleton cannot find his way back home because he does no longer have one (*Joyce* 38). This is also the case with Marianne. Carleton’s goals, Friedman adds, are anachronistic: he wishes for a farm and a family unit, which is incongruous in the world of the 1930s, shaped to a great extent by economic and political forces (*Joyce* 40). Perhaps, the anachronistic wish to which Friedman alludes is rooted in Carleton’s deep-grounded myth of the traditional nuclear family as the epitome of security and stability.

Hannah Arendt has described the consequences of the modern historical period on the private self as follows:

The first stage of this alienation was marked by its cruelty, the misery and material wretchedness it meant for a steadily increasing number of “laboring poor,” whom expropriation deprived of the twofold protection of family and property, that is, of a family-owned private share in the world, which until the modern age had housed the individual process and the laboring activity subject to its necessities. The second stage was reached when society became the subject of the new life process, just like the family had previously been. Membership in a social class

replaced the protection previously offered by membership in a family, and social solidarity became a very efficient substitute for the earlier, natural solidarity ruling the family unit. (qtd. in Friedman *Joyce* 40)

Indeed, Clara, unlike Carleton, aspires to belong to a certain class embodied by Revere, Friedman adds, rather than a family (*Joyce* 40). Thus, Clara wishes to belong to Revere's family for social reasons instead of being motivated by the need to have a family.

Thus, Carleton's sense of dislocation reflects the widespread feeling that the Great Depression caused in America, due to the generalized severing of traditional ties, as Bender notices. The vagrants' attempts to achieve stability, control or a cessation of hostility usually concluded in frustration, death or madness. Within this atmosphere, Oatesian characters rely on the power of names to provide them with a sense of belonging. As a consequence, names acquire a mythical sense for Carleton. For migrants, the concept of lineage is a delusive but reigning myth, since names are the only means to avoid total engulfment. At night, Carleton repeats his genealogy as if it were a prayer, because "[o]nly when he felt that he had named everyone, and that he knew where he was among them, could he fall asleep" (*Garden* 30) (Bender 20, 25). His placing himself among his extended family provides him with a sense of belonging that comes as a fleeting relief to his pain.

This habit is consistent with Carleton's obsession with remembering everything, even bad memories, as if they anchored him to the possibility of returning home. He reflects that "if anything got lost it would be that much harder to get home again" (*Garden* 21). Later on, when Clara runs away, he thinks that he wants her to remember his name, as if legitimizing, expanding and securing his unstable position in the world. These perceptions have a narcissistic nature: he is convinced that he is the only one to bring these memories together and make sense of them; that he is "the center of the world, the universe, and without him everything will fall into pieces" (*Garden* 119). Carleton belongs to a category of traditional and aggressive fathers (typical of the first period of Oates's career) who consider that their

families are articulated around them, that they are the basic pillar that holds them together.

Carleton is thus conceding himself the achieved role of absolute head of the family and keeper of its memory. He is obviously reflecting the myth of nuclear families whose patriarchal alliance placed the father/husband in the center of power and decision-making. Carleton does not realize that he has already been removed from this position: his children Sharleen and Mike have left home much against his liking, and Clara has just escaped his tyranny as well. Carleton himself is about to die; but his disappearance does not mean, as he fears, that the Walpole family will be automatically vanished, not even when Swan dies as well: possibly, the rest of the Walpole children have descendants that will perpetuate the family line. The corpus increasingly proves that families are perfectly able to survive without the father/husband, even if they undergo a process of reconfiguration. At times, this transformation is mostly beneficial, as in *Mulvaney's*, where only after Michael's death does the family reunite.

Carleton is fixated upon guarding the past as a means to gain access to a better future, thus establishing a kind of loop. While pursuing his daughter, Carleton is constantly on the move, forever deprived of a sense of permanence. Clara will acquire the stability that her father had longed for, but under another name. For Clara, Bender argues, ancestral names have no magic. As a female, she must rely on borrowed names (especially after running away from her biological family), and eventually seeks and finds a name who gives her security: Revere (25). While it is true that names for Clara do not hold the magic that Carleton and Swan perceive in them (we should remember that Swan is troubled by his conflictive identity), her maiden name Walpole retains a special status for her. She knows that, by running away, she has lost that name; but even so, in moments of crisis and vulnerability, Clara embraces her old surname as a source of confidence and strength. For example, when she visits the gynecologist as an unmarried woman accompanied by her lover and is referred to as "Clara Revere," she almost retorts that her name is "Clara Walpole." In the end, she does not dare to say so, possibly because she has told Revere that she has no last name. In any case, it is confirmed that the surname of her Family System of Origin

still holds a great relevance for her. Clara's mother was rather distant, and Clara never had a deep bond to her: her first nurturant relationship was established with her father. Despite the general disregard of the parents for children in *Garden*, Carleton was gentle and caring toward Clara, and we may assume that she associates feelings of warmth and security with him, hence the reason why she still clings to her maiden name even after having lost the relationship with her Family System of Origin.

Moreover, sociological factors play a major part in Carleton's role as an abuser. Although he is not young, he is indeed poorly educated, lacks economic resources, and shows lower educational status and lower levels of health (he has stomach aches). He also suffers from environmental stressors, and lives in a violent community and a crowding living environment. His shortage of expressive and communicative skills may play a role in his lack of psychological resources to provide protection and nurturance for their children.

In sum, as Johnson concludes, Carleton slips between the cracks of an economically depressed society, becoming a victim who victimizes others. Like the protagonists of *Shuddering* and *them*, he is a "lost soul" trapped in a cycle of muted baffled anger leading to violence and a silent defeat (*Understanding* 32). Johnson uses terms like this to refer to Howard in *them*, a frustrated man who progressively falls into silence and disconnection from his family and eventually dies in a gruesome labor accident. Similarly, in *Shuddering*, as John Knowles states, Shar Rule is an "alienated animal, almost as mechanized and heartless as his racing car [j] His nature has always drawn its fuel from violence" ("A Racing Car" n. p.).

Another reason for Carleton's anger is, again, found in historical processes. During the Great Depression, Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke explain (85), economic hardships caused the boys to create stronger bonds to their peers than to their families, so that their fathers' impact on their behavior was limited. Girls in the same situation were expected to assume more domestic chores, and this meant a higher level of exposure to tensions within the family. Clara does placidly assume the role as main caregiver of the family, something that both her father and stepmother Nancy praise. This represents a relative role reversal: Clara

assumes the caregiver role that was traditionally adopted by the mother. This is rather common in families with many children: the oldest ones take care of the younger. Nancy, who is rather immature, is not bothered about this reversal, but satisfied to have someone to take care of the house and her baby. However, Carleton, who is pleased with Clara's being a surrogate parent, cannot accept Clara's attempt at acquiring more independence; and this causes the main episode of violence between both.

During the episode of physical aggression, Carleton beats Clara and makes her face bleed. He also insults her. These insults qualify as psychological violence, which often accompanies episodes of physical violence. However, the verbal abuse is less shocking to Clara than the fact that her beloved father physically harms her, since this is the first time he has done such a thing.

It is interesting to note that, unlike in other episodes of violence in the corpus, the neighbors who witness Carleton's assault of Clara intervene: they speak up to defend her and get the aggressor away from her. This may be caused by the sense of community derived from their situation as migrant workers, which does not only cause conflicts due to their impoverished conditions and cramped space, but also creates a sense of solidarity. Nancy also speaks on Clara's behalf the following morning, explicitly censuring Carleton for his behavior, and supporting Clara's decision of running away. Nancy may be acting out of a feeling of guilt or hypocrisy, since Clara suspects that she has been the one to tell her father about her being in a tavern, but this is not proved. In any case, hypocritical or not, Nancy supports Clara.

Following his father's assault, Clara concludes that the only path to take is to give herself up to another man, and she runs away with Lowry, whom she has just met. This marks the beginning of the second section of the novel, named, precisely, "Lowry." Clara is consciously exchanging her submission to one man for submission to another one; and she is also transferring the love for her father, who has betrayed her, to her developing feelings for Lowry.

Lowry has an important role in Clara's development: he becomes a kind of surrogate father for her. First of all, he helps her to get established in the town of Tintern, where she acquires a job and a room

of her own. Lowry worries about Clara's well-being as a father would do. There is a certain role confusion between them, because, upon Clara's insistence, they eventually become lovers.

Secondly, as Cologne-Brookes asserts, Lowry prompts Clara's consciousness to evolve; not by offering positive advice but by encouraging her to discover her own way forward. Clara starts to mouth and repeat his words, as if using them to discover her own (*Dark Eyes* 334). Consequently, Lowry does indeed help Clara to mature by urging her to gain an education: he buys her a dictionary, for instance. When Clara starts to mouth Lowry's words, she is possibly trying to get rid of the accent she was often mocked for; and at the same time, she resembles a small child using imitation techniques to learn to talk, as if she were being born into a new existence. Once more, we detect fatherly inclinations in Lowry: in this case, he resembles a father helping his child to learn and encouraging her to evolve. Later on, Clara will transmit the same love for instruction to her son Swan, urging him to go to college.

Lowry then abandons Clara after she gets pregnant (something he ignores), and comes back when Swan is a little child. The couple sleeps together, but when Lowry offers her to run away with him, Clara refuses, because at this point, she has become totally aware of the dynamics of power between Lowry and herself. When she ran away from home, Lowry had been her most important source of support; but their relationship showed a clear power unbalance, similar to that of a father/child bond: Lowry was always traveling around, presumably on business trips, while Clara remained in Tintern perpetually waiting for him to visit her. She was dependent on him as a little child on her father, and she greatly disliked this. Besides, it is obvious that Lowry does not really respect her: Clara is offended when he claims that he loves her ignorance because he is tired of thinking and reflecting, as he did during his brief marriage in Mexico. Clara surmises that Lowry wants "somebody stupid, somebody who can't talk or bother you [j] Somebody to make love to and forget about [j] A nd you know you'll always be welcome when you come back" (*Garden* 245), as she angrily tells him. Clara is not willing to accept all this, because she expects to

be treated respectfully and enjoys the stability that Revere can provide her and her son with.

Summarizing, we clearly detect a role confusion between Clara and Lowry. She considers him a kind of surrogate father that takes care of her just as her father had done; but at the same time, she feels sexually attracted for him. Lowry initially sees her as a child, and in fact treats her as a kind of relative; but in time he changes his mind and sleeps with her, effectively becoming her lover. In the end, when Lowry wishes to maintain this confused dynamic of lovers in a power unbalanced relationship, Clara rejects him.

Clara's growing distance from her Family System of Origin, not only physically but also in social terms as a consequence of her relationship with Revere which has grant her access to a higher social class, causes in her an increased feeling of sympathy for both her parents and the hardships they had to endure. As she marvels over her new luxurious life, she cannot help imagining what her parents would think if they knew the position she now enjoys. Moreover, despite her resentment toward Carleton, Clara remembers her father with tenderness, and explains this dichotomy in the following words: "You don't stop loving somebody when they hit you" (*Garden* 188).

This is a crucial assertion, because love and violence are not always perceived by the characters as separated phenomena, as commented in the introduction. In this case, noticing that his beloved daughter Clara is escaping his control, Carleton hurts her. Clara flees, but still she seems to long for her father. This enduring love for him could be the reason why she remains attached to her maiden name "Walpole." Had she not escaped, perhaps she would have been trapped in a violent bond with him.

The morning after the assault, Carleton starts his chase of Clara, which provides him with a sense of control that he has not felt in years. He does not know exactly which direction to take, but he does have a specific goal; and thus, he buys a car, which gives him a new sense of freedom and capacity of decision.

In this case, unlike during his travels as a migrant worker, Carleton's movement is motivated by his own choice and not by the external circumstances of his life (to which, nonetheless, he will

eventually succumb by dying from an illness). In this moment, he travels because he has decided to do so, and he has a specific aim: looking for his lost daughter. Significantly, he is trying to recompose his broken nuclear family by bringing Clara back into the position of a submissive daughter, which at the same time would allow him to regain to a certain extent his own position as the good-provider, the authoritarian father whose rules must be obeyed by every member of the family, as well as recovering his family stability and a sense of home.

This search for Clara represents a new goal in a life that Carleton had experienced as utterly determined by chance and uncertainty. His decision to look for Clara and not for his other children who have also left home for an unknown destiny may be caused by his preference for her: as the favorite daughter, she is the one that hurts him the most by challenging his authority and running away. Carleton's obsession with his daughter appears to mirror Michael's and Jesse's fixation for Marianne and Shelley, respectively.

This new fleeting sense of control makes him feel giddy and somewhat overwhelmed, but even at this time when he is determined to look forward, he cannot resist looking back into the past once more: as soon as he acquires a map, he unsuccessfully tries to locate Kentucky (his home state) on it. The fact that Carleton craves for control and for the maintenance of family structures that are starting to be altered stands in strong contrast with the movement constantly featured in the novel: he yearns for the permanence and rigidity manifested in the structure of the traditional nuclear family he craves for, whereas the novel presents constantly the economic, social and familial transformations of the time.

In this manner, the notions of motion and stillness come into focus again. These concepts are crucial in the novel, not only figuratively, through the motion of climbing the social ladder; but also literally, for there are multiple scenes involving cars, trains, gas stations, maps, etc. First, much of this incessant movement stands for the uncontrollable events of life. Alternatively, movement in this novel is associated to the determinism that prevents the characters from controlling their own



lives. It represents an uncontrollable force from which the characters cannot escape, as noticed in Carleton.

Second, towards the end Carleton starts to perceive that everything is moving except him: this is a kind of premonition of his imminent death. Life is equated to movement; so that when the restless Carleton goes still, due to his exhaustion and his physical pain, he gives up to death. Consequently, Carleton dies ill and alone, none of his goals obtained. From the beginning, Johnson argues, Carleton's defeat is clear (*Understanding* 35), and this points out once more to the deterministic forces that rule his life.

In his quest, Carleton has the opportunity to reflect upon his past and, even if he feels that death is near since he has not been healthy for a while, he wishfully hopes to make sense of his life and correct his mistakes. Now that his illness is literally depriving him of a future, Carleton can only look at the past. At the same time, his obsession with the past could be interpreted as the yearn to recover a model of family which, due to the unstable circumstances of the Great Depression, has practically vanished. Significantly, Clara does construct the traditional nuclear family that Carleton longs for, which could be an indication of the recovery of this model after the Depression.

In the original version of the novel, Carleton dies from his illness. He spends his last two months in bed in a strange city. During this period, there are hours when "he would feel almost no pain [j] his mind would be empty and baked clean and he would have nothing to think about anyway" (*Garden* 119). Carleton has slipped into the motionlessness of death, which also seems to stop his very reflective processes.

The fact that Carleton only achieves stability in death points out that the type of family he has been chasing, and his role in it as a good-provider, are doomed to eventually lose their prevalence as the dominant ideology. Before dying, he again tells himself that he is the one to remember all the events that have occurred to the family, and reflects about the dispersion of his family, telling himself that if he could live longer, he would change those events. He is thus finding consolation in the conviction that he could have recovered his nuclear family and his status as the controlling father; and dies resignedly, his

mind quietly slipping into oblivion. Ironically, he dies in a bed, deprived of the capacity of movement, which is precisely what he had craved for: permanence and immobility. It would appear that his stubborn perusal of a dying familial order has turned against him.

Oates's revision of the novel provides a different death for Carleton: after the frustration over not finding Clara overwhelms him, he causes a violent altercation by striking at strangers on the street with a pipe. In the end, he is killed by a policeman whom he also confronts. Oates labels his death as "self-determined, not through natural causes" ("Conversations" 183).

Carleton's death enters into the category of what is commonly known as "suicide by cop." De Similien describes this phenomenon as occurring when a suicidal individual provokes a law enforcement officer into killing her/him. The concept was described by Dr. Marvin E. Wolfgang, who labelled it "suicide by means of victim-precipitated homicide" in 1959 (De Similien n. p.). The popular term "suicide by cop" was first used in the early 1980s by Karl Harris, a Los Angeles County examiner. This is a relatively common occurrence, which nowadays accounts for about 10% to 36% of police shootings. Suicide by cop is reported to be more prevalent in men with psychiatric disorders (such as chronic depression, bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, substance use disorders, etc.), poor stress response skills, adverse life events, or recent stressors, and it is more prevalent in those of lower socioeconomic class (De Similien n. p.). Carleton fits the profile of these suicides: he belongs to a low socioeconomic stratum, has poor stress response skills, adverse life events and most importantly, recent stressors: the loss of Clara. Suicide by cop, De Similien adds (n. p.), crosses the privacy of the suicidal act to involve the life and psychosocial functioning of others. Its outcome is an increased friction and mistrust between the police and the public at large.

Carleton's decision to end his life links him to his grandson Swan, whom he never meets. Both men transform their rage and impotence into acts of violence that turn first against others and finally against themselves. The difference between them is that Swan kills himself by his own hand and Carleton prompts another person to kill him. He has not attained the control he had wished for nor even with his last

desperate act. As opposed to the original version, this death is not resigned, and he does not find some peace in the thought that he would have recovered his ideal of a nuclear family and his position as its head; but expresses his rage at his failure to attain his goal.

In short, *Garden* shows the apparent dispersion of the Family System of Origin: the biological mother is dead, the older daughter married and living apart from them, Clara has run away and the father has died during his chase of her, and it is not known what happens to Nancy and the other children. This suggests a general pattern of disconnection and loss which fits the general atmosphere of the Great Depression and the rootless life of the characters. In any case, this dispersion is not caused by Carleton's elimination from the family (he believes that he is the only one to unite them); but by the complex socioeconomic context of the era which the characters are generally unable to overcome. This also points out at the determinism clearly the novel features.

#### 4.3.2.2.2 PCA in them

In the novel *them*, Maureen suffers PCA at the hands of her stepfather Furlong. In order to analyze the figure of Furlong as a perpetrator, we shall resort again to the previously exposed theories by Milner and Crouch, focusing exclusively on the features exhibited by this character.

Among the personal traits, several cognitive or affective factors are perceived in Furlong. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether he has a low self-esteem or not, it is known that he has health problems and suffers severe back aches, which may actually influence the way he sees himself: we may imagine that he perceives that his youth and strength are steadily fading, and this might affect his self-perception and increase his need of validating himself as, for instance, an authoritarian parent.

Furlong's treatment of Maureen changes in time. At the beginning, he tries to befriend her, but she hates him and does not appreciate his efforts. Later on, Loretta induces Furlong to believe that the girl has a reproachable behavior like stealing, and he begins to mistrust her, considering that his suspicions are confirmed when he discovers her

prostituting herself. Or perhaps he starts to dislike her due to her general rejection of him.

Another personal trait perceived in Furlong is a behavioral characteristic: he is not much involved in parenting. He has not raised any of Loretta's children, who are already teenagers when he meets them; and although he tries to be affectionate to them, he is only able to create a rather dim and distant bond with them. He is not the children's biological father (except for Randolph), but their social father. Among the psychological factors, we find that Furlong appears to be prompt to anger, given his quick temper and frequent fights with his wife.

Family characteristics are prominent in this case. Although there is no information about Furlong's Family System of Origin, the family he forms with Loretta is a source of distress for its members, which show distrust and poor communication, two characteristics which hinder cohesion as well: for instance, Furlong accuses Maureen of not behaving properly, and does not believe the girl's objections, confidence and communication are clearly failing.

There is also role distortion between Maureen and Furlong, perhaps initially motivated by Loretta, who uses her daughter to sexually lure Furlong home. Upon one occasion, Loretta orders Maureen to massage Furlong's sore back, adducing that she is tired, which appears to be true. Maureen complies, and as she extends the oil, she feels a stab of sympathy for Furlong and places her cheek on his back in a tender gesture of understanding. We sense some type of attraction toward Furlong in this scene, however fleeting, which Oates confirms:

it seems to me only natural that a girl of her age, in close confinement with a man, however physically unappealing (though in fact [Furlong] isn't ugly—just rather coarse) might begin to associate him with her own sexual urges. It might be quite commonplace for girls to have fantasies about men near them, teachers, ministers, older men generally, but if these fantasies should ever be confronted with reality, it would be disastrous for the girls' development. I believe firmly that all kinds of fantasies are normal—if not normal, why would they arise?—but that a definite line must be drawn between the interior and the

“exterior”. Most people draw this line quite readily. Indeed, it very often happens that the daydreamer does not really *want* his or her fantasy to come true; he wants it only as fantasy, for reasons he can’t explain. Or it might be that a young girl (perhaps a young man also...?) desires the appropriation of certain qualities in an older man—his freedom, evident wisdom, his knowledge and wider experience—rather than the man himself in any physical sense. My characters generally fall in love with people who will unlock a “higher” self in them—as I think we all do, in fact. The love-object of an individual will determine his or her development, obviously, and if the love-object is somehow beneath one’s own personality good example in literature is Proust’s Swann and his intolerable Odette) or in Maureen’s case, *used* only as a means of her escaping an intolerable, confined life, the natural growth of the personality is damaged. (“Correspondence” 54-55, emphasis in the original)

It is obvious that Maureen would not wish to have an intimate relationship with her stepfather, but this occurrence adds to the confusion between Furlong and Maureen, who seem to fluctuate between being step-relatives and potential lovers, something that is partly promoted by Loretta, who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, pushes her daughter to become a substitute of the mother/wife. As a consequence of this role-confusion, Maureen neither calls her stepfather by his name nor does she call him “dad,” as Loretta wishes: she is thus refusing to recognize and submit to Furlong in his role as the head of the family and the social father. Maureen does not have any name for him because she does not have a place for him in her family or her life; or perhaps, she simply does not want to consider what that place is and the implications of their role confusion. As a result, she is both rejecting him as a possible lover (which would be represented by the intimate gesture of calling him “Patrick”), and as a social father (represented by her calling him “dad”).

The confusion of roles is similar to the one between Clara and Lowry; but in this case, we have a real custodial father in the figure of Furlong, even if he is not a biological father. In *Garden*, Lowry simply

resembled a father due to his behavior, but never legally or socially adopted this role. Besides, while in *Garden* the sexual attraction was openly expressed and later consummated, it is never fully assumed in *them*, but only internally (and perhaps fleetingly or unconsciously) experienced.

Finally, Furlong shows some of the sociological traits of perpetrators described by Milner and Crouch: he does not possess a good health, his family has meager economic resources, and he lives in a violent community. Numerous episodes of violence are described in the novel, most of them of family violence, but also of violence exerted by strangers: as a child, Jules himself experiences a non-described form of sexual violence, possibly a rape.

Furlong exerts physical violence upon Maureen on two occasions. The first one has already been commented in the previous chapter: it is a fight between Maureen and Furlong that culminates into his slapping her twice. For a while, Maureen's hate for her stepfather keeps mounting, just as her mother forces her to be with him more often. At times, Loretta also forces Maureen to skip school to avoid being alone with Furlong, whom she fears.

One day, Furlong sees Maureen riding a car with one of her clients and soon guesses the truth, confirmed when he searches her room and finds her secret savings. He then assaults her, striking at her with his fists. Furlong justifies his assault on Maureen, apparently, as a punishment for the transgression of prostituting herself. He is trying to claim his position as an authoritarian and social father, which he feels that the girl has actively challenged.

In order to enact his role, Furlong follows the ideology of the GPR which Maureen is defying here, because she is not depending upon him as a source of economic support, but upon her own means, thus escaping his control. Furlong may feel humiliated because he interprets this as a questioning of his capacity to provide for the family, which is a symbol of self-esteem and virility for him. The only means he finds to restore his lost position of power as the head of the family is to punish Maureen by attacking her.

Alternatively, Furlong may be moved by some sort of sexual jealousy: he might be unconsciously enraged that she has not had sex

with him, just as she did with other men. This could be related to the role confusion that exists between these two characters: Furlong could be furious that Maureen has not shown blatant sexual interest in him; but he cannot recognize this because that would work against the very morality he is violently trying to impose on her. In short, Maureen has rejected him twice: as a potential lover and a father. After the assault, Furlong is charged with four months in jail and Loretta files a divorce against him. He subsequently disappears from the narrative, apparently having no further contact with the Wendalls.

Maureen exhibits some of the aforementioned traits of children who suffer from PCA, according to Milner and Crouch. She experiences difficulties such as anxiety, sleep disturbance, self-destructive behavior, low self-esteem, and social detachment. She appears to be traumatized not only by Furlong's beating, but also by her time working as a prostitute. Here, however, we focus exclusively on the direct consequences of Furlong's attack.

At this point, Maureen is more fearful than ever. Hers is what Starr labels as reality-based fear, a trait that she had already exhibited before Furlong's assault but which is now intensified. The terrible episodes of violence that often shatter Detroit used to make her weary; but at this point she has suffered that violence in her own flesh, inflicted at home and by a family member; and thus she feels frightened, and perceives the world as even more threatening. Although Maureen was afraid of the bloody news of violence against women at the hands of strangers, she has experienced an assault by a member of her family, which is in fact the most common type of violence.

The main consequence of Furlong's physical attack is that Maureen falls into a kind of comatose state: she lays in bed for several months, sleeping most of the time. When Loretta forces her to go to a medical checkup, she walks like a zombie, barely realizing her surroundings. The girl refuses to speak or react to the world around her despite being mostly conscious. She does not want to think about what has happened, or to learn what is happening now: as Grant puts it, Maureen lacks the courage to awaken to a world from which she had sought to escape (102). Indeed, Maureen is also shocked due to the failure of her attempt of abandoning her present life by earning her own money.

This reaction is actually typical of Maureen, a gentle and passive character who dreams of permanence and stability. In this case, due to the shock of her stepfather's beating and of having her dream shattered, her wish for non-mobility takes the form of a removal from life. By being in bed and sleeping most of the time, she feels safer, because she does not expose herself to any trouble or inconvenience.

Apart from this, Maureen takes refuge in eating copiously as a manner to deal with her pain and anxiety and to try to soothe the effects of her trauma, a common reaction in the corpus. She has learnt, Grant states, that openness and tenderness make her too vulnerable, that one can easily break if he does not wear the right mask (102). Therefore, she eats abundantly, and puts on a lot of weight, using her new body-shape as a disguise under which to hide.

Like Richard, Bender affirms, Maureen uses food as something to fill up her entire body; but for her it is a means of anesthesia rather than defiant self-assertion (44). Certainly, food consumption makes Maureen drowsy, allowing her the peaceful refuge of sleep. Maureen thus joins the series of Oateasian characters who employ consumption of food to fill an emotional void, along with the Pedersen children and mother in *Wonderland*, among others. In the case of Maureen, this void is caused not only by the trauma of the assault at the hands of a relative, but also by the emotional detachment and even betrayal that her family has showed toward her until that moment: her mother neglected her both physically and emotionally, then, she placed her into a complex and potentially dangerous relation to her stepfather, and besides, she did not assist her when she was assaulted by Furlong for the first time; whereas Maureen's independent siblings mostly ignored her, especially Jules, who paid little attention to her after leaving home, and tried to use money as a substitute or compensation for the loss of their previously close bond.

Despite their initial disinterest, Maureen's family comes together to help her during her ordeal. In fact, Maureen's reintegration to life is partly prompted by her uncle Brock, who unexpectedly reappears in the narrative after reconciling with his sister Loretta and coming to live with the family. The importance of this character should not be overlooked, as Bender warns: Brock is a minor figure but his presence



haunts all the novel. He sets the events in motion by killing Loretta's first lover Bernie, and also helps Maureen back to life (46).

The importance of Brock is acknowledged by Loretta herself, who asserts that all that has happened until that moment is Brock's fault for killing Bernie. At this moment of the narrative, Brock becomes the most positive and nurturing father figure from the book, as opposed to the biological and social fathers Howard and Furlong. Daly points out that the ironical fact that Brock is a killer suggests humans' capacity for a wide range of behaviors (43). Indeed, he can be considered a surrogate father for Maureen during her recovery. In the end, Brock becomes severely ill and is admitted in hospital, which he suddenly leaves without telling anyone, not to be seen again.

The rest of the family also contributes to Maureen's recovery: Jules visits her and writes letters to her while he is away, Betty encourages her to recover; Loretta is tenderly nurturing and protective of her, emphatically refusing to commit her to a hospital; and Brock tends to her and keeps her company for hours, reading the newspaper and Jules's letters to her, while he encourages her to get out of bed.

This suggests the lasting prevalence of the Family System of Origin beyond the formative years of a person, which is particularly reflected in Brock's reappearance. He infuses strength in Maureen, reconnecting her to the world by reading the newspaper to her, just as her mother had similarly prevented her removal from the world by refusing to commit her to a hospital, and Jules's letters reminded her of their special sibling bond. All these actions inspire Maureen to look for movement, activity, life; to awake from her death-like comatose state and fight again for a stable future. As to reinforce her assumption of control in this new phase, Maureen stops eating convulsively and adopts the extreme opposite of this habit: she meticulously starts to control her eating habits, feeling a new revulsion for food.

Maureen recognizes and appreciates the role of her family in her recovery; but despite this, when she finally gains access to a better neighborhood through marriage, she decides to keep her distance from them, possibly out of a certain resentment and mistrust for their initial disinterest in her. Certainly, Maureen had been mostly forsaken by everyone before Furlong's severe attack. But the crucial reason for

breaking the bonds with her Family System of Origin is her obsession with fleeing her environment by erasing her painful memories and establishing her own Self-Created Family System. She thinks that her own family will provide her with the durable protection that her Family System of Origin could not provide her with despite all their (recent) care for her, even if they have proved that they can behave as a united family during times of crisis. Maureen concludes that breaking the relationship with her Family System of Origin will infuse more stability to her new role as a traditional mother/wife.

In any case, the Family System of Origin, the Wendalls, is not destroyed after suffering the violence of the stepfather/Father: Furlong disappears from the family circle by means of a divorce, and the family reconfigures itself with the momentarily addition of the nurturing uncle Brock and the rest of the family's change of attitude toward Maureen. Even after Maureen forsakes the family, Loretta, Jules and Betty are still together, helping each other just as Detroit recovers from the revolts.

In summary, the loss of the father figure does imply the automatic destruction of the family, as Carleton believed in *Garden*: in *them*, both the biological father, the social father and the ephemeral surrogate father are lost (by death, by divorce and by disappearing) and the family endures the losses. In the subsequent novels, Oates is starting to create a pattern of resistance to the centrality of the father as an irreplaceable, absolutely central member of the family whose disappearance automatically causes the family's destruction. This pattern becomes increasingly prevalent: in *Wonderland*, for example, the fathers are powerful destructors of their families; but in *Mulvaney's*, the family does survive Michael's harmful actions.

#### 4.3.2.3 Introjection and Incorporation in *We Were the Mulvaney's*

The third case of father-daughter abrupt discord is found in *Mulvaney's*, where Michael is unable to come to terms with the changes brought about by his daughter Marianne's rape, partly because it entailed the loss of her virginity. Loss is in fact the main theme of the novel, perceived in the losses that Marianne faces after her rape and

vanishment from home: she loses not only the possibility of having a consensual sexual initiation, but also her self-esteem and even her own sense of identity, her family, her house, her friends, her sense of belonging, etc. Loss is also manifested in Michael, who loses his perfect daughter Marianne, or rather, his image of the girl; along with his business, the family farm, and his family. The following discussion is therefore focused on loss, and represents the first example of loss that we shall analyze, along with *Carthage* in the chapter “Children.”

To initiate our analysis, we shall first define and classify losses resorting to Tizón’s and Nomen Martín’s theories. Subsequently, we shall apply Abraham and Torok’s theories of introjection and incorporation as detailed in their book *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994). First, we shall concentrate on the consequences of the rape for Marianne, the most severe being her father’s forsake of her, which leads her to an experience of self-loss. Then, we will analyze Michael’s reaction taking into account his position as head of the household.

Loss is something inherent to life. It is experienced every day, but its psychological impact may vary considerably: a divorce, a demise, economic losses, losses caused by illness, aging, etc. In general, a loss is produced by “an event which is perceived to be negative by the individuals involved and results in long-term changes to one’s social situations, relationships, or cognitions” (Miller and Omarzu 12). A high number of losses are linked to the experience of trauma. A trauma entails “the personal experience of drastic, horrendous, unpleasant, shocking events” (Stroebe et al 82).

The most notorious kind of loss is the one that results from the death of a person, but there are many other types. Tizón differentiates four types of loss. First, relational loss: this kind of loss is always related to the “other”—mostly a love object—, and it includes death of close people, the end of relationships, abandonments, affective lacks and abuse. Second, intrapersonal loss, which implies the loss of our own physical or intellectual capacities. Third, material loss, or the loss of things. Fourth, evolutionary loss, linked to the phases and changes of our life cycle, that is, of our childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age (qtd. in Nomen Martín 21).

After the loss takes place, a complex process of mourning starts, or at least should start, by which the subject tries to adapt to the new conditions. In order to deal with relational losses, which usually comprise the loss of a love object, and the ensuing process of mourning, we shall resort to Abraham and Torok's distinction between introjection and incorporation (125-131, 134). Abraham and Torok's understanding of the term introjection derives from its use by thinkers such as Sandor Ferenczi, Sigmund Freud, Karl Abraham (who bears no relation to Nicholas Abraham) and Melanie Klein.

Abraham and Torok's thinking especially derives from Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), where he presents two basic approaches to grief: mourning and melancholia. Both are caused by the same factors, such as a loss; however, while mourning is "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on," melancholia lasts longer and has pathological features (Freud 243). In both of them, there is "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding" (Freud 244). For the person experiencing mourning, it is clear that the love object does no longer exist, and so he detaches his libido from it, freeing thus his ego in a conscious process. This concept is similar to Abraham and Torok's introjection. Conversely, in melancholia, the loss of the love object is unconsciously experienced by the subject. In this case, "the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego [where it] served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (Freud 249, emphasis in the original). Therefore, the object-loss is transformed into a loss of the ego, just as it occurs in Abraham and Torok's incorporation.

According to Abraham and Torok, introjection is the constant process of self-creation and readjustment of the subject's psyche when facing changes. It is a process of acquisition, which involves our potential to expand by opening ourselves to our own desires and feelings as well as to the outside world. That is why, as Ferenczi explains, introjection requires first of all self-love:

I describe introjection as an extension to the external world of the original autoerotic interests, by including its objects in the ego [j] In principle, man can love only himself; if he loves an object he takes it into his ego. (qtd. in Abraham and Torok 112)

Therefore, if the situation created by the reality of a loss sustained by the psyche is accepted and worked through, the loss would require major readjustment (Abraham and Torok 126), and this is what the process of introjection implies: when the loss of a love object is introjected, the subject can healthily recover the libidinal energy invested in the lost object and is able to reinvest it in a new love object.

However, that is not always the case. Sometimes, when a painful, shameful or unwanted event occurs, we tend to isolate this suffering, to remove it from our free flow of ideas, emotions and feelings, and to avoid its communication to other people. This process of removal of a reality that is terrible to the subject may give origin to the so-called fantasy of incorporation (or nonintrojection). It occurs when we introduce “all or part of a love object or a thing into one’s own body, possessing, expelling or alternately acquiring, keeping, losing it” (Abraham and Torok 126).

As the authors put it, “in order not to have to ‘swallow’ a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing” (Abraham and Torok 126). The subject thus rejects to mourn, even if he or she is devastated, because he or she does not want to recognize the full dimension of the loss. In short, incorporation is the refusal to introject a loss. Two processes are involved in cases of incorporation: objectification, or pretending that the suffering is not an injury to the subject, but instead, a loss sustained by the love object; and demetaphorization, that is, taking literally what is meant figuratively.

This second aspect, demetaphorization, represents an attempt to revert the process of metaphorization which according to Abraham and Torok necessarily accompanies any process of introjection. Thus, the basic movement from introjection into incorporation occurs when words cannot encompass or express what has happened, that is, when the subject cannot verbalize the traumatic experience of loss. Therefore,

reverting the natural linguistic process by which words are used metaphorically to represent or replace absent things, an imaginary thing replaces words in an attempt to deny the very existence of a conflict such as a traumatic loss. This is what the process of demetaphorization means. Incorporation occurs along with “[t]he abrupt loss of a narcissistically indispensable object of love [...], yet the loss is of a type that prohibits its being communicated” (Abraham and Torok 129, emphasis in the original). Eventually, the whole situation is swallowed up: the words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed, and of course, the trauma itself. To sum up, “[i]ncorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such” (Abraham and Torok 130, emphasis in the original).

This lack of verbal expression results in the erection of a so-called secret tomb or secret crypt inside the subject.

Crypts are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object's doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the *object's* secret that needs to be kept, *his* shame covered up. (Abraham and Torok 131, emphasis in the original)

Thus, a fantasy is created around the secret that is concealed even to the subject in order to avoid any readjustment of his or her mental topography:

Granting our metapsychological definition of “reality” as everything, whether exogenous or endogenous, that affects the psyche by inflicting a topographical shift on it, “fantasy” can be defined as all those representations, beliefs, or bodily states that gravitate toward the opposite effect, that is, the preservation of the status quo. (Abraham and Torok 125)

On the one hand, a fantasy has thus a preventive and conservative function and is essentially narcissistic: it tends to transform the world rather than inflict injury on the subject. Therefore, the “fantasy life” that

results from incorporation aims to hide the authentic injury. This is linked to a utopian wish that the memory of the affliction had never existed or, on a deeper level, that the affliction had had nothing to inflict. But the secret affliction might be unexpectedly arisen by strange acts and sensations. On the other hand, incorporation is usually hidden behind an appearance of normality and is manifested in some personality traits or “perversions.” It only appears openly in delirium. According to Abraham and Torok, there are several steps to overcome incorporation, and they usually require the assistance of an analyst.

The circumstances in which the loss occurred are crucial to determine its effects. In the novel, the Mulvaney family is socially perceived as an ideal family, and their intrafamilial relationships appear to be perfect too: they are a traditional nuclear family where each member assumes its own role. Marianne is not only an extremely popular girl at school, she is also the apple of the eyes of her family, especially her father. Everything is then apparently perfect until Marianne’s rape, which reveals the limitations of the family structure, in this case, the extreme rigidity of perception that prevents the family (particularly, the father) from assuming a change that alters or breaks the arrangements of their traditional family.

The loss represented in this novel is mainly metaphorical, since it is originally an effect of the family’s—especially the father’s—inability to adjust to the reality of Marianne’s having been raped: eventually when she is made to leave home because of this maladjustment, the loss becomes more literal, although it is never final since Marianne does not die in the novel.

It is crucial to analyze how the rape and its aftermath take place in order to understand their effects upon Michael and Marianne’s bond. The circumstances of Marianne’s rape are the following: after attending the Saint Valentine Prom of 1976, Marianne goes to a party where she meets Zachary Lundt, a boy who is two years older than her. They drink together and he offers to give her a ride to her friend’s house, where she is spending the night. Marianne’s memories start to get confused from this point on due to the effects of alcohol. Nevertheless, she remembers clearly how Zachary stopped the car at a parking lot and raped her, beating her when she tried to run away. Zachary threatens her with the

formulas typically used by rapists to subdue the victim by, on the one hand, putting the blame on her, and on the other hand, assuring her that this is exactly what she wants: “*You know you want to, why’d you come with me if you don’t? Nobody’s gonna hurt you for Christ’s sake get cool*” (Mulvaney 82, emphasis on the original). He also threatens Marianne, ordering her not to tell about the rape; and degrades her by calling her “bitch” and “cunt” (Mulvaney 144). Besides, as it is common for a sexual attacker to “share personal information in an effort to bond with the victim and to promote pity rather than anger” (“Effects of sexual assault” n. p.), Zachary tells her about his inner conflicts and fears, especially concerning his incapacity to deal with peer pressure: “*What would Jesus do?— that’s what I ask myself. I try, and I try, but my good intentions break down when I’m with other people*” (Mulvaney 77, emphasis in the original). This may seem an honest confession on Zachary’s part, but it can also be a deceptive way to put blame for his brutal deeds on the others.

Before describing the effects that the rape has on Marianne, it would be enlightening to briefly focus on the rapist, Zachary Lundt, who may be labeled as a juvenile sex offender, according to the definition provided by Ryan, Lane, Davis, and Isaac: a juvenile sex offender is a youth from puberty to legal age who commits any sexual act with a person of any age against the victim’s will, without consent, or in an aggressive or threatening manner (qtd. in Murphy and Page 368). Murphy and Page offer a detailed description of adolescent rapists as having more anger deficits than general juvenile delinquents, lower self-esteem or neurotic symptoms, poor peer relationships, less bonding with peers, and more general maladjustment (368, 370-372). There are indications that Zachary’s self-esteem might be rather low, since he tells Marianne about his inner conflicts. However, he receives a solid support and defense from his friends after the rape; therefore, he cannot be said to have poor peer relationships, but strong ones.

Besides, adolescent offenders and their families may be in denial of the offense. In some cases, they might even try to minimize the nature of the abuse, the number of victims and the amount of violence (Murphy and Page 371, 372). In fact, a number of adult offenders began their offending career as adolescents. This is what happens in Zachary’s case:



years later, he is accused of sexual abuse by at least one more woman, so obviously he has not stopped abusing women. According to Cologne-Brookes, Zachary's attitude to girls barely differs from Michael's in his youth. He had a "predatory" attitude, based on a vague resentment he had against his sisters, mother and college girls. Judd deduces that his father could have been a sexual predator like Zachary.

This is a hint at Michael's aggressive and controlling nature (typical of rapists), which is also proved by a dream he has in which he sits on a white horse surrounded by his children. He is clearly romanticizing his possessive attitude towards his children, who in his dream stand literally in an inferior position compared to him. He expects his family to quietly and happily comply to his command. Like Michael, Jesse in *Wonderland* is an authoritative father obsessed with being a perfect father, but in both cases their obsessions harm their daughters Marianne and Shelley. The crucial difference is that Marianne, along with her family, survives Michael's insidious behavior; but Jesse prompts Shelley's destruction. There is a clear evolution here in Oates from families handling in increasingly positive manners the damage brought upon them by inflexible fathers/husbands.

The National Crime Victimization Survey states that rape is forced sexual intercourse which includes both psychological coercion as well as physical force. Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal, or oral penetration by the offender or offenders; including cases where the penetration is carried out by means of a foreign object such as a bottle. This definition includes both male and female victims (Bachman 119). Rape is generally one of the most unreported crimes. In the case of women, this may be due to the difficulty that some women have to recognize their victimization as a crime of rape and their inclination to self-blame, as well as the lack of support they receive (Barnett et. al 179). Men are even less likely than women to report rape because it violates their male self-identity (Brannon 208).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Male rape has received less attention than female rape, partly due to the fact that men are sexually victimized to a less extent than women; and partly due to their reluctance to report it. Research has found that men are sexually coerced and harmed by both men and women in ways that are similar to women's experiences: through bribery, threats of withdrawal of attention, physical intimidation, physical restraint, and physical harm (Brannon 208). In the corpus, there

The main motivation behind rape is not sexual desire. Linda Fairstein, former Head of the New York County District Attorney's Office Sex Crimes Unit, calls rape a crime of violence in which sex is the weapon (qtd. in Douglas and Olshaker 37). This is proved by the fact that rapists have argued that one common characteristic of their victims was their vulnerability (for instance, being alone at night): they were not attracted by their physical appearance (in fact, most rapists could not even describe their victims) but by their apparent weakness. This highlights the violence of the act and argues against a sexual motive in these crimes (Brannon 209). Besides, at times, rape does not bring sexual pleasure to the rapist, but it invariably causes degradation to the victim (Baumeister 120). Thus, rape is not an act of sexual desire but an expression of power and hostility (Mettger qtd. in Pagelow 220). According to Russell, rape derives basically from issues of male violence and predatory male masculinity (Russell qtd. in Pagelow 220).

Thus, in cases of rape, sex is used to humiliate, frighten, degrade, punish and control the victims; to get retaliation for perceived wrongs; to assert power and strength; to prove the rapist's virility, and to overcome feelings of being underloved. Besides, entitlement becomes a central motive, especially in cases of marital rape: husbands view their wives as their property and feel entitled to do whatever they wish to their bodies, with or without their consent. Some other men have the same perception outside marriage (Pagelow 208, 220).

In *Mulvaneys*, Marianne's sexual assault falls into the category of acquaintance rape or date rape, which is committed by a person the victim knows, such as a friend, a partner, a coworker, etc. According to statistics, the largest group of this type of sexual offenders is composed by males aged seventeen to thirty (Gluck n. p.). This is Zachary's case, who is nineteen years old. In this kind of assault, drugs are commonly used both to make victims incapable of resistance and to prompt them to forget the attack. The most usual drug is alcohol, as in this case, where Zachary gives Marianne a vodka cocktail.

Date rapes are far more usual than stranger rapes, despite common beliefs. In 1995, R. Bachman and L. E. Saltzman found that only 18%

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might be an instance of male rape in *them* (the novel describes an unspecified sexual aggression) suffered by a young Jules Wendall, who never discloses it to anyone.

of female rape victims had been assaulted by a complete stranger. Of these, 10% were assaulted by their husbands or ex-husbands, 16% by boyfriends or ex-boyfriends, 3% by relatives and 53% by acquaintances or friends (Hampton et al. 178). It is a common belief that stranger rape is more traumatic, but as Finkelhor puts it, and Marianne's experience confirms, "[r]ape is traumatic not because it is with someone you don't know, but because it is with someone you don't want—whether stranger, friend or husband" (qtd in Pagelow 208).

The rape in *Mulvaneys* means that Marianne's sexual initiation is achieved through violence, which will afterwards seriously condition her sexual and affective life. Marianne first reacts trying to hide the rape from her family and friends, but when she suffers a nervous breakdown, her mother discovers that something is wrong. Her suspicions are finally certified by the doctor who examines Marianne and confirms the rape.

A rape has a series of immediate physical and psychological consequences, some of them persisting for a long time. We shall mention, first, the physical effects for Marianne and then focus more extensively on the psychological ones. As we shall explain, the most damaging consequence of the rape is her father's reaction to it, since Michael's rejection of his daughter increases her feelings of shame and guilt.

The article "Effects of Sexual Attack" (n. p.) lists a series of common physical symptoms after a rape that Marianne experiences, such as sleep disorders, changes in appetite and nausea, fatigue, loss of energy, etc. One of the most prominent ones is pain, which for her is "sharp and swift as the blade of an upright knife thrust into her" (*Mulvaneys* 71). Besides, Marianne's body is completely stiff with tension, and her bodily positions usually disclose an attempt to protect herself.

After the rape, Marianne loses her appetite; and in the years to come she will also lose much weight. Additionally, she cuts her hair very short. All these alterations make her resemble a boy. This is motivated, perhaps unconsciously, by Marianne's fear of sex: she is possibly unconsciously starving herself in order to lose attractiveness and fend off possible sexual predators. Oates confirms this by arguing

that the refusal to eat can be, among other things, “a way of ‘eluding’ people who pursue to closely” (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 175); that is, people who are interested in having close relationships for which the person is not ready. In fact, as Johnson affirms, eating disorders are common among women who have suffered sexual abuse. In such cases, fasting yields a powerful sense of control and mastery (*Invisible* 175).

Thus, the refusal to eat is in many occasions accompanied by the avoidance or rejection of sex, as we see in the figures of Marianne and Maureen from *them* after she awakes from her coma. This occurrence is explained by Dr. Richard A. Gordon, who argues that women with anorexia and bulimia usually recoil from consensual sex which they consider disgusting or painful. The literature on anorexia stresses the links between the denial of food and the avoidance of sexual maturity and its risks: the refusal to eat is bonded with a wish to forestall womanhood and maintain the body of a child, as the feminist historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg notes (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 173). And so, Johnson adds, this accounts for several of Oates’s characters being portrayed as emaciated, boyish-looking young women whose lack of nurture makes them resemble doll-like and unsexed automatons: Shelley, Elena from *Do with Me*, and Ingrid Bone from *Crazy*. It is then common for Oatesian female characters to experience sexual acts as negative and destructive; and it is rare for these women to experience genuine tenderness or a real connection to others during sex. In fact, many of these women suffer sexual abuses, like Marianne, Ingrid Bone and Marya from *Marya* (*Invisible* 173).<sup>30</sup>

It is also possible that Marianne is punishing herself for what she perceives to be her reckless behavior leading up to her rape, as she repeatedly says: “I was drinking, I was to blame” (*Mulvaney*s 145, emphasis in the original). In this case, the appeal of anorexia is described by Oates as being “[a] way of controlling and even mortifying the flesh” (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 175).

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<sup>30</sup> More specifically, Marianne suffers a date rape, Marya is repeatedly molested by her cousin, and Ingrid endures all kinds of sexual and physical abuse and humiliation at the hands of a satanic sect. Dreadful experiences of sex for women start to change, broadly, in *Do with Me*, in which Elena becomes liberated from her sexually passive state, among other reasons, when she discovers for the first time the pleasures of sex with her lover.

In the essay “Food Mysteries,” Oates argues that “[w]ithout appetite, steadily losing weight and noting with a grim pleasure how readily flesh melts from your bones, you experience the anorexic’s fatally sweet revelation: *I am not this, after all*” (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 175-176, emphasis in the original). This is highly related to Marianne’s situation: she undergoes an experience of self-loss caused by her traumas.

Apart from the physical consequences, one of the major emotional effects of rape is the appearance of the Rape Trauma Syndrome, identified by Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom in the 1970s and defined as “a cluster of emotional responses to the extreme stress experienced by the survivor during the sexual assault” (“Emotional Impact Rape” n. p.). This trauma is specifically caused by the fear of death that the survivor experiences, and again Marianne is a good example of this reaction since she acknowledges that she felt that Zachary could have killed her.

The first stage of this syndrome is called “Acute Phase.” It is characterized by the disruption of the victim’s normal life, by shock and disbelief, especially if the rapist is an acquaintance. It is also typical to feel numb. This may find expression either in the so-called “expressed style” if the victim openly displays her emotions; or in the “controlled style” if she tries to hide them. Marianne’s response is controlled, since she tries to maintain composure and hide her emotions. The second stage is the “Reorganization phase,” or the time when survivors reshape their life and personality to adjust them to their new selves, lives, conditions, etc. This reshaping works at several levels: first, on the level of personality, the victim needs to find out her own mechanisms for coping with the trauma. Marianne basically resorts to religion:

It came to Marianne then [...], that you could make of your pain an offering. You could make of your humiliation a gift. She understood that Jesus Christ sends us nothing that is not endurable for even His suffering on the cross was endurable, He did not die. (*Mulvaney* 90)

This strategy helps her to keep her wrath under control: Christ “has instructed her in the way of contemplation; of resisting the impulse to

rage, to accuse” (*Mulvaney* 142). Marianne understands this process as one of soul purification. She decides against hatred, as Oates asserts: “Marianne exemplifies the way of love, magnanimity and forgiveness” (“Interview Reader’s” n. p.). This decision, as we shall soon explain, causes her father’s anger.

The second level is the support system, constituted by friends and relatives who provide emotional support, something that Marianne can barely enjoy: she cannot find true relief, understanding and consolation in anyone when she is raped. Her father is possibly the person who more clearly rejects her, and so, the trauma of the rape is seriously aggravated by the father’s reaction to it. The third level concerns already existing life problems, such as drug addictions, which may reappear as a result of the attack, and the fourth level only applies if there was a previous sexual assault. Marianne is in none of these last two situations.

Several concerns are linked to this Reorganization Phase. To begin with, psychological apprehensions, such as the denial of the effects of the assault, are common. This can be “a component of the survivors’ recovery, since it gives them space to catch their breath before beginning the stressful task of processing and resolving the trauma” (“Emotional Impact Rape” n. p.). Moreover, as detailed in “Effects of Sexual Assault,” flashbacks sometimes take place “when memories of past traumas feel as if they are taking place in the current moment” (n. p.). They may be triggered by any everyday occurrence and comprise images, sounds, smells or sensations. Something similar happens to Marianne, who experiences such a flashback of Zachary ripping her dress while she examines it at home.

Depression, guilt and loss of self-esteem are also frequent psychological reactions. Marianne’s guilt can be referred, by using De Zulueta’s classification (as discussed in the introduction) as “behavioral self-blame,” because Marianne blames herself for her behavior leading up to the assault. De Zulueta asserts that this strategy restores a sense of control over the survivors’ future lives, since they feel that they can take measures to protect themselves better. In fact, Marianne acquires a radical strategy of self-defense by avoiding relating too intimately to others.

Marianne's feeling of shame leads her to conceal the rape; and she experiences guilt as well, because she had been drinking and cannot remember everything. Shame and guilt are two of the reasons why Marianne refuses to mention the rapist's name, and when her family learns it, she does not want to report Zachary to the police. She affirms that she was to blame too, since she had been drinking. She repeats that "she did not wish to speak in error [...] She did not wish to name any names and to involve her friends or anyone for no one was to blame except possibly herself" (*Mulvaneys* 134-135). Besides, as one of the understandable first reactions of rape victims, after the rape she bathes herself and washes her clothes, so it would be almost impossible to find physical evidence such as semen against Zachary. As Oates summarizes it, "[i]n the past, laws concerning rape and sexual assault were not as liberal as they are today in most states. Marianne knew that it would have been futile to press charges under the circumstances" ("Interview Reader's" n. p.).

This occurrence was common not only at the time of the novel, the 1970s, but persisted for decades: even during the 1990s, according to Walby, it was common for rapists to escape their processing by courts: there was a higher rate of acquittal in these cases than in other crimes. The structure of the court and the types of evidence which were deemed admissible influenced the situation against the woman: evidence of the raped woman previous sexual history could bias a jury toward the rapist if she was found to be "unchaste" (141-142). This episode from the novel, then, shows that the public institutions of courts and justice were controlled by people who were totally insensitive to women's needs and failed to protect them from violence, as Marianne knows.

Marianne's self-esteem problems find overt manifestation in her compulsive abhorrence of mirrors and self-reflections on them: "*It is common for a rape victim, male or female, to avoid mirrors and direct confrontation with all images of the 'self.'* As if, where there had been a person, there is now no one" (*Mulvaneys* 221, emphasis in the original). This quotation is especially meaningful because it corroborates our association of the effects of Marianne's rape with the sense of loss: even if she is not dead after her rape, she feels she has lost herself. She cannot find herself because her personality has undergone

a deep change: she has lost her virginity and her role as the good sweet girl. As Mortimer notices, virginity

signifies a situation that is irretrievable once it has been lost. Indeed, the concept takes on importance, with few exceptions, only after it has been lost. Virginity is defined by the absence of a particular event; the presence of intercourse entails the absence of virginity [...] virginity represents something so losable through the passage of time that it can symbolize the entire problem of transience. (91)

Certainly, this is not only a turning point in Marianne's life, but also a point of no return: she cannot go back to her former self, and at the same time, she is not accepted in her present state, especially by her beloved father. This is why she cannot confront her own mirror reflection. The feeling of loss is not only experienced by the family but also by the subject herself, which suggests that Marianne's experience of self-loss may be close to what Tizón classifies as an intrapersonal loss.

Other reactions linked to the Reorganization Phase have social connotations. The victim can find it difficult to return to pre-assault social patterns, or feels a deep distrust toward other people, particularly men ("Emotional Impact of Rape" n. p.). Thus, among the emotional reactions that Marianne experiences, one of the most prominent ones is the development of fear, especially directed to the contact with other people:

It was The Fear. The Fear that overtook her after people, well-intentioned of course, made too much of her. Especially if they worried aloud about her, and touched her. A wise voice warned *If you accept kindness undeserved, even worse will happen to you.* (Mulvaney's 309, emphasis in the original)

Sexual concerns are also prominent in this phase. The future sexual life of the survivor is to be altered, because



sex, which usually involves pleasure, was instead used as a weapon to humiliate, control and punish. It will probably take some time for the survivor to disassociate the sexual assault from consensual sex. [...] If the survivor was a virgin at the time of the assault, they may have a heightened fear of their first consensual sexual encounter. (“Emotional Impact Rape” n. p.)

Indeed, Marianne will avoid for years any situation leading to intimacy. Finally, there are physical concerns, related to the health problems that follow the assault and, in this case, the physical attack too (“Emotional Impact of Rape” n. p.).

The worst tragedy for Marianne appears to be her banishment from her house: she loses her home when she is hurriedly sent to live with a relative without her brothers’ knowledge. This decision is motivated by Michael’s inability and refusal to live with her raped daughter. After this, Marianne will never come back home, nor her father will contact her again. She thus starts what may be defined as a “runaway life,” frequently moving from one place to another, changing jobs often and never establishing deep connections with anyone. In fact, she literally flees from any intimate relationship, which proves the persistence of the Rape Trauma Syndrome even in this period of her life.

Although she is truly hurt by her parents’ attitude, she barely complains and never bears ill feelings against them. Instead, she misses them and blames herself: “I’m immature, and careless, I disappoint people. My family specially. My Dad, and my Mom. I’ve hurt them and there’s not much I can do to make it right” (*Mulvaney* 342). Marianne’s self-love is thus seriously threatened and, according to Ferenczi’s words on this topic, this would disqualify her for the experience of introjection (Abraham and Torok 112). The fact that Marianne is rather happy in this period of her life, but she still keeps missing her home and, most significantly, she still keeps wishing to be “forgiven” and allowed to return, proves again the persistence of the Rape Trauma Syndrome through her lack of self-love, since she still considers herself guilty of her rape and for this reason in need of forgiveness.

Moreover, her wish to return to her home shows her inability to introject its definitive loss: as a consequence of the rape, the place that

she calls “home” does no longer exist, since the family is being torn apart. The acknowledgement of the loss of this metaphorical home is too hard for Marianne because it is in fact a manifestation of the loss of what had defined her self until then: as a result of her being raped she loses her place in the family and is accordingly expelled from home, which represents or symbolizes the brutal experience of self-loss which she suffers. Until her rape her identity had been clearly defined by her being the perfectly immaculate only daughter of the ideal Mulvaney family, but all this changes when she is raped because this traumatic event triggers the loss of this identity, her family and her home at the same time. In Abraham and Torok’s terms, Marianne needs to introject these losses in order to go on with her life.

Ironically, her cat Muffin, which is the one permanent link with her long-lost home and thus from the beginning represents a great relief for her with its “[l]oving unjudging eyes [...]. Unknowing” (*Mulvaney* 70), becomes from this perspective a symbol of what prevents her from introjecting the loss of home, family and identity, a symbol of what Abraham and Torok call “fantasy”: according to them, the subject resorts to fantasy in order to avoid any necessary mental shift because fantasies have “a preventive and conservative function” and “refer to a secretly perpetuated topography” (125) and for this reason they are obstacles in the process of introjecting a loss. The fact that Muffin represents a relief for Marianne precisely because of its “unknowing” quality corroborates this interpretation of the cat as a symbol of Marianne’s fantasy of the possibility of going back home to her family and her old identity ignoring the changes brought about by her rape.

Marianne’s inability to introject the loss of her old self and her home finds also manifestation in the fact that the consequences of her trauma are still present and too evident: she has sudden episodes of crying, and since she cannot trust anyone, she remains isolated and avoids personal relationships. This is typical of people who suffered abuse at an early stage of their life. She feels safer if she keeps her distance, which is obviously at odds with the process of introjection defined as the broadening of the ego to allow the inclusion of the love objects in it (Abraham and Torok 112). Since she has not recovered the libidinal energy invested in her lost love objects, she cannot reinvest it

again. As a result, she rejects the romantic proposition she receives some time later from a man despite loving him too. She is not ready to cope with an intimate relation yet: in fact, her anxiety makes her abandon the farming cooperative where they both worked and lived. Later on, when she is offered a promotion in another job, she also refuses and flees again. This is caused by her low self-esteem: she does not consider herself valid or good enough for the job. Evidently, her low self-esteem shows the prevalence of the Rape Trauma Syndrome and it still keeps disqualifying her for the introjection of her loss.

Marianne finally finds stability while working at an animal shelter. She stops running away since she starts a gradual process of introjection of her rape and the losses it comprises. Significantly, it is during this period of time in her life that her cat Muffin has to be sacrificed, but now she is able to come to terms with its loss and with the other losses that the cat symbolically represents. In Abraham and Torok's terms, Muffin's death represents the end of the fantasy that has kept Marianne's mind at least partially trapped in her vain and impossible wish of being forgiven and allowed to return home to her family and her previous identity regardless of her traumatic rape. This is the culmination of a process which started with Marianne's original attempt to hide and to a certain extent deny both her rape and the loss of self-esteem that it brought about, and then developed through different stages in which, although Marianne could no longer deny the rape and its external effects, she could not introject the losses and the changes it brought about: for this reason, she kept clinging to the fantasy of the home and self that Muffin represented. At the end, after a long journey of healing and self-discovery, she is able to recover her self-esteem and thus introject the loss caused by the rape, which allows her to reorganize her life: she finally marries one of the doctors of the hospital and has two children.

Toward the end of the novel, she is summoned to her father's deathbed, supposedly by him. It is not clear that he recognizes her because he is not completely conscious, but Marianne chooses to believe that he does, and feels that she has reconciled with him. This is crucial for Marianne because she interprets this scene as one of reconciliation, which helps her to finally put an end to the past. Besides,

she is able to come to terms with the loss of the love object (her father and what he represents: the old home and family, and Marianne's role in it) in a peaceful way, something that she had done as well when her cat died. According to Abraham and Torok, this acceptance is rooted in her recovered self-esteem.

Marianne's rape is a shock not only for her father, but also for the whole family: she was the dearest child of the family, the only daughter. But since this kind of violence is socially shameful, they cannot bring themselves to talk about it or even to say the word "rape" because they cannot completely acknowledge that it has actually occurred: "*rape* was a word that came not to be spoken at High Point Farm. What were the words that were spoken? I remember *abuse-assault-taking advantage of-hurt*. [...] The perpetrator [...] was always referred to as *he, him*" (*Mulvaney*s 157, emphasis in the original). Specifically,

Corinne [j] could not, would not, utter the word *rape* [j]  
What happened to their daughter was *assault, molestation*,  
occasionally *sexual assault*. To Michael, who had a  
difficult time speaking of the incident at all, and whose  
resistance to speak of it seemed to be increasing with the  
passage of time, it could only be referred to as *it*.  
(*Mulvaney*s 172-173, emphasis in the original)

This is a way to deny what has happened, and it denotes their inability to deal with it and introject it, since "[i]ntrojecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths" (Abraham and Torok 128). It is as if by erasing the words (in this case, the words "rape" and "Zachary Lundt"), the linguistic representation, they were trying to erase the deed itself. Marianne, the living evidence of the rape, becomes thus proscribed as a shameful secret for the family, and each of its members negotiates this situation in her/his personal manner. While the rest of the family seem eventually able to introject the rape and go on with their lives, Michael can never do so. He incorporates the events and cannot overcome the pain. It is mainly his reaction that eventually leads to the disintegration of the family.

Michael cannot avoid incorporating his loss in Abraham and Torok's terms. This means that he cannot acknowledge that his little daughter has been raped and is not a virgin anymore. The fact that she has always been his favorite makes the situation more difficult for him. In an outburst of honesty and emotion, Michael tells his wife how he feels about Marianne:

It isn't just my daughter, it's all of us. She can't be blamed but it's all of us. I vowed I would love them all equally—I did. I tried. When they were babies, I tried. But the girl—she ran away with my heart. She can't be blamed, but that was how it was. Always I'd be thinking, *I would kill for her, my baby girl*. But [...] I'm not strong enough, I'm a coward. How can I live knowing that! [...] I wish to God I never had to lay eyes on her again. (*Mulvaney's* 185, emphasis on the original)

His reaction is conditioned by his feelings of possession over Marianne. Michael has always enacted the role of the head of the family, and he feels in a position of power over them, which is now threatened by Zachary's attack and Marianne's decision not to accuse him. According to Anne Phillips, rape was traditionally considered a crime against property, more specifically male property. It was compared to stealing something that belonged to a father or a husband:

The very etymology of the English term, linking it to the snatching or dragging away, locates rape as a property crime involving live prey. It was used to cover the abduction, not just of women, but of animals, children and slaves. (Phillips 42)

It was not until the nineteenth century that women were allowed to sue a rape in their own name (Phillips 43). Lorenne Clark and Debra Lewis argue that as late as the 1970s, rape was still considered an offence against men, since it devaluated women's reproductive and sexual capabilities (qtd. in Phillips 43). Precisely, Marianne's rape occurs in 1976.

As previously commented, something similar is depicted in Oates's novel *Son*: when Elsa Vickery is gang-raped, her father and brother feel personally offended and attacked. Her brother Ashton even wonders if the crime was "in a way, directed at *him*, the men had known *him*, [j] and wished to hurt and insult *him* in the cruelest way possible" (*Son* 42, emphasis in the original). Elsa's father Thaddeus shows a similar reaction when he complains about the sympathetic but otherwise passive reaction of the community: "They might consider *me* they might consider the hell I've been going through" (*Son* 51, emphasis in the original). The fact that Michael, like Ashton and Thaddeus, feels personally insulted is part of the reason for the Mulvaney's disintegration.

Both fathers feel personally insulted not only because they think they own their daughters, but also because they are losing status in their communities due to the rape. This is especially noticeable in Michael, a well-known and well-liked active member of the town, who feels that his high social esteem is being destroyed. These are two key aspects of the GPR. In time, he will lose this very role as a breadwinner by losing his business and becoming unable to provide for his family.

Michael's wish never to see her again provokes Marianne's final estrangement from the family. After she is forced to leave, he never visits or phones her; he does not even mention her (at least, in the narrator's hearing). This wish and its outcome show that Michael's love object is not exactly Marianne herself, but his image of Marianne as his perfectly sweet, submissive and immaculate daughter: this is the loss caused by the rape, and the one he cannot cope with, which ironically causes the eventual loss of Marianne herself through her banishment from home. As Oates explains, "If Michael, Sr. had behaved differently, the Mulvaney tragedy would not have occurred" ("Interview Reader's" n. p.). Marianne has to disappear because she is a living reminder of the loss of Michael's actual love object, Marianne, the immaculate daughter: Michael's demand of Marianne's banishment shows his inability to recover the libidinal energy originally invested in his previous love object, his image of his beloved daughter, to reinvest it in a new love object, Marianne the victim of a brutal rape. This reinvestment is essential for the development of the process of

introjection, which consequently is not successful in Michael's case: there is no readjustment of his psychic topography and Marianne the rape victim comes to represent a constant threat for the fantasy of incorporation he tries to build by swallowing his lost love object, together with his own feelings of guilt and shame. Accordingly, he can never verbalize his loss, but only express his fury.

Meanwhile, a secret tomb gets erected in Michael's psyche where he hides the loss of his beloved daughter as an intrapsychic secret. Although the rape is something that has "happened" to her, somehow her father sees it as her doing, which corroborates Marianne's own feelings of guilt. From Michael's perspective the rape is Marianne's shame, and her secret, which he needs to conceal from people, something which Abraham and Torok identified with cases of incorporation.

The world of fantasy created by Michael to repair the injury caused by the loss of Marianne takes two opposite directions. The first one involves the creation of the self-justifying fantasy that he has been betrayed by everyone, especially his daughter: "Marianne he'd loved most. Who'd hurt him most. Betrayed. He could not always remember why, exactly" (*Mulvaney's* 389). This strategy allows him to excuse his own disloyalty toward his daughter. The second fantasy is his conviction that he has sent his daughter away in the name of love. "He believed, he would swear to his very death—it had been love" (*Mulvaney's* 382). Ironically, Michael was also banished by his father, who had declared that he was no son of his. However, he refuses to acknowledge this coincidence by insisting that he had been repudiated out of hatred, while Marianne had been sent away in the name of love. This is seen again in *Wonderland*: Jesse Vogel indirectly destroys his daughter Shelley by trying to protect her, that is, according to him, by "loving" her.

We might infer that Marianne's banishment has punishing properties, even if Michael never states this but justifies his decision by considering that Marianne has betrayed him. First, he appears to be punishing her for having been raped, as if it were her doing. Second, he is punishing her for not pressing charges against the rapist. Michael seems to consider that both occurrences are challenges to his fatherly

authority: not only has Marianne caused his shame by being careless enough to get raped; but she also resists his pressures to bring Zachary to court. Michael is experiencing the destruction of his role as the head of the family or good-provider, and tries to retain his authority with such a dramatic decision as expelling Marianne from the family.

Then, instead of negotiating the loss of his daughter on a psychic level, Michael stubbornly sets on his legal quest for justice, which brings no result: he spends huge amounts of money in his search for a trial, despite the fact that a lawyer tells him that it would not be a “winnable” (*Mulvaney* 183) case if the victim does not testify since it would be considered a case of mutual consent unless the serious injuries of the victim prevented her from testifying, the victim were mentally retarded or there was enough physical evidence of the rape, which is not the case. He adds that these cases occur all the time, but they are rarely taken to court. As he summarizes it, “juries don’t like to ‘interfere’ in domestic cases. In male-female cases. If sex is involved, especially” (*Mulvaney* 184). Therefore, Michael fails in his only attempt to help Marianne significantly against her will.

This sterile process destroys him, the relation with his family, and the power he used to hold over them: his sons leave the house, he separates from his wife, loses the family farm and land, his business, his social position, etc. At sixty-one, he dies from cancer without consciously reconciling with his daughter. It is not even clear that he has asked to see her. In contrast with Marianne herself, Michael never overcomes her rape, and the loss of his beloved daughter.

As Bernard argues, the GPR has received new demands in the last decades, and good-providers are expected to show more nurturance and sensitivity toward their families; something that Michael is unable to do. This incapacity is typical from traditional fathers, who had emotional support from their wives but were forbidden to display their own emotions. Marianne was Michael’s favorite child, but, possibly influenced by his detached relationship with his Family System of Origin and his own sexist views of women (commented in the chapter “Parents”), he is unable to reconnect with his daughter in her new state (a non-virgin, raped girl), to accept the alteration to their lives. As Friedman summarizes it, the garden of the Mulvaney’s lives is violated



when Marianne is raped, and thus made useless as exchange value to ensure the paternal legacy, so the father embarks on a quest for revenge which costs him everything (“Feminism” 487).

Corinne also has a role in Marianne’s banishment because, as we have analyzed in the chapter “Mothers,” she chooses to support her husband over Marianne. Within the frame of this chapter, we might also contemplate her decision as partly motivated by the fact that the wife of the good-provider is expected to provide emotional support to him. In this case, the support comes at the expense of her daughter. Corinne tells herself that this is the only manner to keep the family united: significantly, submitting to the demands of the head of the family, she clings to a traditional notion of a nuclear family which revolves around a heterosexual couple.

However, Corinne eventually loses her husband too, and the original configuration of the Mulvaneys disintegrates along with their illusion of perfection. When she understands that her efforts have been futile, she still clings to her original decision of taking sides with her husband by trying not to get too involved emotionally with her children and being distant and impatient toward Marianne. This rejection functions as a cover-up for Corinne’s guilty feelings for abandoning Marianne. At the same time, it proves Corinne’s lasting adherence to the good-provider ideology through her unconditional support of her husband.

But Corinne gradually comes to introject the trauma, acknowledging her unfair behavior and apologizing to Marianne when Michael is agonizing. Perhaps, it is precisely her husband’s disappearance that allows her to place her libidinal love again in Marianne, now an adult woman who has survived a rape and no longer her former virginal daughter. Corinne also states that she loves her, something she had not said for a long time. She has then successfully readjusted her psychic topography to the present situation, and she organizes a family reunion to celebrate that they can be a family again. In other words, she has reassessed her position as the traditional wife of a good-provider, and overcome his submission to such role. From this point on, she will be able to reorganize her life on her own terms, free from her previous dependence on the GPR. This is crucial in the novel,

because at the end, the family has transformed and grown, but it has not been destroyed: the Mulvaney family survives Michael's disappearance.

Corinne herself starts a new life by living with a female friend. They both reopen Corinne's beloved antique shop, which used to be mostly a hobby and is now transformed into a business. She has made of her former hobby/dream a remunerated activity that allows her to earn her own money. This entails a new configuration of the family not based upon common blood or other imposed traits; but upon conscious and chosen ties of love and loyalty. This could be an anticipation of Arlette from *Carthage* working as a volunteer and living with other women at a battered women's shelter after her divorce. Both women reconstruct their lives in innovative manners, not needing to resort to previous traditional constructions of nuclear families, or to the presence of a father/husband or a partner.

In conclusion, unlike Carleton and Furlong, Michael does not physically harm his daughter, but his attitudes and actions terribly damage her, because she comes to believe that she is to blame for her rape. Michael's behavior is as destructive as the behavior from the other fathers that we are discussing: he almost destroys the whole family due to his possessiveness and his inability to adapt to change.

Thus, Carleton, Furlong, Jesse and Michael are unable to come to terms with their daughters' first sexual experiences (or even their mere possibility) because, in their roles as good-providers, they consider that they must protect them from other men. Besides, female sexuality was always considered problematic and as such, repressed. As Rich argues (30), there has always been an intense fear of the suggestion that women shall have the final say as to how their bodies are to be used, as proved by these three fathers. In other words, these fathers are afraid that the girls decide over their own bodies because they consider this a challenge to their monologic rule, and to their claim over their lives and bodies.

#### 4.3.2.4 Abduction in *Little Bird of Heaven*

The three previously commented cases of father-daughter relationships featured fathers who were afraid of losing their daughters,

and, as a consequence, their role as fathers. The fourth case, found in *Bird*, is slightly different, since first Edward loses his role as a husband and father, and as a consequence, he acts recklessly to try to regain his lost position. The results are catastrophic: he eventually dies. The most terrible and ultimate consequence of Krista's abduction is then Edward's death. This is the main theme of the novel, along with the mystery of Zoe's murder: Krista's loss of her father and the complicated process of mourning that she undergoes.

The violence exerted by Edward over Krista is a collateral effect of having lost his role as a custodial father/husband after he is suspected of murdering his lover Zoe. The novel is haunted by this gruesome murder, since Edward becomes one of the suspects in the case, and as a consequence, his wife divorces him when she discovers her husband's adultery during the police investigation. The strain of the doubt about the murder troubles all the members of the family, but none of them really believe that Edward is guilty.

The divorce also has an influence over the children, because both parents tend to confront each other and try to gain the children's complicity. And so, Krista sides with her beloved father and tends to confront her mother; while her brother Ben supports their mother, and strongly opposes their father.

At the beginning of *Bird*, Krista, aged eleven, exhibits an unconditional affection for her father: "I loved my father not because he was a good father or a good man—how could I have judged him, that he was a 'good' man or otherwise—but because he was my father, he was my only father" (*Bird* 90). In fact, the novel can be conceived as a tribute to Krista's lost father, since the opening words contain a reference to him: "The yearning in my heart!" (*Bird* 3). As the narrative advances, Krista's ambivalent feelings for him become evident as she starts to realize his unpredictable behavior: "I loved my father very much, and was frightened of him; I had been made to be frightened of him" (*Bird* 23, emphasis in the original). Krista is unable to cope with this negative perception, and therefore she tries to hide her father's possible crimes and his fearsome behavior. She then deludes herself into believing that Edward is an affectionate and considerate father, whom she refers to as "Daddy," a word that Krista herself admits to be

childish. In turn, Edward calls her “puss,” which perpetuates their troubled bond.

Krista treasures her father’s possessive love: “no one else loved me like this. No one else would wish to possess me” (*Bird* 35), still denying the potential violence that his possessive attitude implies. In this respect, this novel shares some similarities with *Expensive*: both are first-person reflections on the loss of the protagonist’s parent, as well as an attempt to discover their true nature. That is, they feature the possessive bond between a parent and a child; in *Expensive*, it is the child who tries to possess the mother, while in *Bird* the connection is much more blurred: Edward wants to possess Krista, who wishes to be possessed back, but also to possess him, or at least, her memory of him. Krista’s feelings seem close to a romantic attachment which is never fulfilled due to its incestuous nature, but which finds a surrogate figure in her schoolmate Aaron Kruller.

During the narrative, Krista tries to harmonize her conflictive memories of her father. She profoundly loves him, but at the same time, she is conscious of the burden that his love represents: “I was thinking how I loved my Daddy, and how strange it was that a girl has a Daddy, and a girl loves a Daddy, a girl does not judge a Daddy” (*Bird* 40). Krista is disappointed at times at her father’s erratic, obsessive and paranoid behavior, but she makes a great effort to prevent these tendencies to interfere in their relationship: “*I can love you best, Daddy! I can forgive you*” (*Bird* 86, emphasis in the original), she thinks. Even when her mother talks to her about the separation, Krista will remain loyal to Edward, and trust him until the very end: “*Daddy will come back and change all this. Anything that is being done, Daddy will change back to what it should be*” (*Bird* 104, emphasis in the original). She has a blind faith in her father, and pictures him as an almost mythological figure, since she is looking at him through the eyes of a little child who is convinced of the almightiness of her parents.

But Edward does not respect Krista. In this regard, he resembles Clara’s surrogate father/lover Lowry, who used to belittle her. As Walters asserts, there may be danger for daughters if during the formative years of adolescence fathers are close to them but do not take them seriously. For instance, the father may be sympathetic to the

daughter's moods but he may not understand them, considering that it is difficult to know what a woman really wants. And so, this daughter will learn how to charm and not how to take charge. These fathers are warm, protective, sometimes strict and sometimes indulgent, but rarely deal directly with their daughters' emotional and intellectual issues (qtd. in Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 81-82). Of course, Edward feels a deep affection for his daughter, but possibly does not realize the terrible influence that he exerts over her and how much he might hurt her through his actions, even if it is unintentionally. Krista does not feel inclined to "charm," but she does indeed have difficulties taking charge of things, and becomes a rather submissive girl. In this case, more than considering that women are difficult to understand, it seems that, often, Edward simply sees Krista as a little child, and so he does not bother too much about what she might feel.

In the short story "Ruth" from the collection *Goddess*, the father offers a similar perspective to that of Edward, not paying much attention to his daughter:

Wreszin might have sensed a kinship with his older daughter, had he bothered with her; but he never thought of it. His children were burdens to be protected but he did not think of them in themselves. In his world there had always been too many children—brother and sisters, cousins, babies, neighbors' children. They were part of the landscape. You took care of them and worried about them, but you did not pay much attention to them until they did something wrong. (*Goddess* 87)

Wreszin only considers his daughter and other children as unique individuals when they misbehave, that is, when they challenge his authority. Once more, we have a man who is intent on keeping his position as the head of the family.

In the case of *Bird*, hence, we perceive a father/daughter relationship which is distortedly anchored to an anachronistic past, that of Krista's childhood. In order not to lose the relationship that they used to have when living under the same roof, both father and daughter retort to this infantilized mode of relating which is disturbing precisely due to

its anachronistic nature. Therefore, instead of having a father-daughter relationship, they develop a “daddy-baby girl” one. Perhaps, Krista feels protected by retreating into the world of children by means of this fantasy of her father, because the present is terribly turbulent for her. To sum up, this childish choice of names conveys Krista’s strong reticence to separate from her father, and her father’s own reluctance to accept the passage of time and his daughter’s inevitable maturation. Krista, writing as an adult, is able to realize her childish dependence on her father; and Edward is so obsessed about regaining his position in the family, that he does not appear to notice the effects that the distortion has upon his daughter. He also enjoys it because it echoes the time in which he still was a legitimized father/husband; instead of being a divorced non-custodial father.

One of the most prominent effects of this affective distortion is that Krista eroticizes, to a certain extent, the father-daughter bond when she becomes a teenager. However, she does not overtly express these feelings: she transfers them to her older schoolmate Aaron. Being the son of Edward’s late lover, Aaron is closely linked to her father, and this is what initially appeals to Krista: “my feeling for Aaron had only to do with Zoe Kruller, and with my father” (*Bird* 184). Subsequently, she physically identifies Aaron and Edward: “[Aaron’s] big hands [...] resembled my father’s hands” (*Bird* 202). The identification of the hands of a parent with those of a lover is curiously also present in Swan, when he visualizes Clara’s hands in his lover Deborah’s. The fact that they both evoke their parents through their lovers’ hands could suggest the confused boundaries between touching for performing childcare tasks and touching with intimate or erotic purposes.

Krista’s ambiguous reactions to Aaron, a combination of love and fear, reproduce the way she reacted to her father: “I was frightened of him and yet I hopelessly loved him” (*Bird* 199). She knows that she cannot expect love from Aaron, not even respect, because Aaron is convinced that Edward Diehl has murdered his mother, and thus he is enraged with the Diehls, including Krista. This replicates the situation with her father, since neither of them show respect for Krista. In Walter’s terms Krista has learnt to charm, that is, to be submissive and compliant, and not to take control of situations.

Krista's submissiveness is perceived during an episode in which Aaron prevents her from having a drug overdose, and later on molests and tries to strangle her: "I knew it was Aaron Kruller's penis pressing against my buttocks, ropey-hard, urgent, and Aaron's big-knuckled hands were closing around my throat 'This how he did it? Like this?'" (*Bird* 204). Aaron is referring here to his mother's murder, punishing Krista in a substitutive manner for her father's suspected implication in it. Aaron, in his position of power over the drugged and sick Krista, uses sex as a weapon to humiliate her, since sexual violence is mainly motivated by a wish to control and degrade. Krista does not fight him because she is afraid that he might become more violent: "I believed that if I did not resist he would take pity of me. I thought *I must make him love me, so he will not want to hurt me*" (*Bird* 204, emphasis in the original). This episode shows another analogy in Aaron's and Edward's treatment of Krista, they exhibit conflicting behaviors toward her by both protecting and harming her (or the other way around): Aaron assists her when she overdoses, but subsequently molests her; while Edward abducts her but does not physically harm her.

Just as in the case of Swan's attraction for Clara, Krista's erotic inclination for her father cannot be appropriately described by classical Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud's approach to early female sexual development argued that when little girls realize that they do not have a penis, they feel inferior (a process called "penis envy"); considering their genitals as wounds resulting from castration. They hold their mothers responsible for it, developing a hatred for them. Then, fathers become the objects of the girls' affection, and they wish to have sex with them and produce babies. These two desires are substitutive for penis and penis envy, Freud concluded (Brannon 108-109).

This process, later labelled "Electra complex" by Carl Jung, is an extremely simplistic and phallogocentric approach to female sexuality that underscores its particular traits and describes them according to a male model. In Brannon's words, it considers women as being, essentially, failed men (110). Many authors, like Maureen Dowd, reject the notion of penis envy (qtd. in Brannon 106). Similarly, Luce Irigaray asserts that psychoanalysis has forced the evolution of little girls' desire to fit the schemata that explains the evolution of little boys, in a totalitarian

manner. In other words, the constitution of female sex has been wrongly described as a lack or atrophy (91, 98).

Consequently, instead of resorting to the Electra complex, we shall once more refer to Ellyn Kaschak, who developed an analogy to Freud's Oedipus complex in the development of the female personality by formulating the Antigone phase, which is perfectly illustrated by Krista's bond to Edward. In Sophocles's plays, Antigone was Oedipus's daughter and half-sister, who sacrificed her independent life to take care of her father after he blinded himself. Oedipus considered that it was his right to have this devotion. Kaschak sees a similarity between Antigone and the fate of the good daughter in a patriarchal society. Men grow in societies that grant them power, and so they consider women as their possessions, and their relationships with them as an extension of their own needs instead of a mutual interaction. As mentioned in the chapter "Mothers," an unsolved Oedipus complex for men results in their treating women as inferior and dependent, feeling entitled to exert violence over them, as Edward Diehl indirectly does by abducting Krista.

When women fail to solve the Antigone complex, Kaschak argues, they become passive and dependent, and allow themselves to be extensions of others rather than striving to gain their independence. They deny their own needs, including the physical ones, because they learn that men's wishes are more important than their own and hence, they limit their lives according to this, including their sexual lives, which are controlled by men and as a result become extremely limited. Moreover, these women try to deny their physicality and make their bodies invisible, a denial that may be expressed in eating disorders. These limits may also derive in feelings of self-hatred and shame, and the need to form relations to others as the only means to feel self-worth. In contrast, when women resolve the Antigone phase, they separate from their fathers and other men and become independent people. This independence allows them to form interdependent and flexible relationships to others, especially women (Kaschak qtd. in Brannon 114-115).

Krista is indeed the incarnation of the good daughter, who is willing to passively obey any of her father's demands. Edward's



patriarchal pulls indicate that, in Kaschak terms, he has not solved his own Oedipal phase and as a result, he egoistically considers Krista as his possession, and thus as a tool to get his goals: regain his lost position in the family.

During her adolescence, Krista has not successfully solved her Antigone phase, as seen by her inability to separate from her father and become an independent person. Seeing Aaron as a surrogate of her father, she submits to his aggressive sexuality to the extent that she adopts masochistic practices while recreating the assault with pleasure: “*Things I do now to myself thinking of you, Aaron,*” she writes in an unsent letter to Aaron, “*Squeezing my hands around my throat till almost I can’t breathe*” (*Bird* 211, emphasis in the original). She is adapting and submitting her sexual experiences to Aaron’s sadistic trait. She even conceals the attack from others, deciding that if her mother sees her bruises, she would tell her what one of Zoe’s friends, Jacky DeLucca, told the police after she was beaten up: “*Didn’t see who it was, who hurt me. Never knew his name*” (*Bird* 106, emphasis in the original). She is as willing to defend Aaron as she is to defend her father.

Meanwhile, Edward, unable to adapt to the loss of his role as custodial father/husband which granted him access to his children, ignores the restraining order several times, and secretly meets Krista. Edward takes advantage of these opportunities to question his daughter about her mother’s private life, and to emotionally blackmail Krista by telling her she is the only one who remains loyal to him as a means to ensure her future siding with him.

Thus, in his confused and dispossessed state (he has lost his position as a husband and a custodial father), Edward desperately tries to prove his innocence in Zoe’s death as a means to regain his position in the family. This supposedly “redeeming” process takes a toll in Edward’s emotional state, and makes him grow increasingly paranoid and unrealistic. Like Michael Mulvaney, Edward also turns to drinking, which of course does not help his cause. What precipitates Edward’s death is his inability to handle the separation from his family: while trying to preserve his family unit (along with his own position of power within it), Edward paradoxically puts it in danger by assuming the role of a traditional protector/father. When this role becomes an obsession,

it almost provokes Krista's death or serious injury; and directly causes Edward's killing.

In any case, Edward's actions, unlike the decisions of Michael Mulvaney, do not result in the dispersion and the near destruction of the family. Once more, the family prevails even if its nuclear structure, and then binuclear, is banished, proving that traditional fathers are not, as they think, indispensable pieces for the survival of family ties.

In the end, Edward resorts to desperate measures to try to gain his family back: he holds Krista hostage at his motel room to force his wife to speak to him. He tells Krista that he and Lucille are still husband and wife and that this will not change; not realizing that this has already changed even from a legal point of view, because they are both separated and divorced. Edward stubbornly refuses to accept the loss of his role as custodial father/husband.

Edward has a gun but he assures Krista that it is only for self-defense, since he would never harm her: this represents a test of Krista's trust in him: she is afraid but at the same time wishes to believe his words. At this point, he appears to start considering her an adult for the first time, instead of a child or a simple extension of himself: he is unprecedentedly honest with her, and informs her about his present and past anguish. This represents the break of their anachronistic relationship: he now talks to her as a mature person.

He recognizes that he is desperate, but also affirms that this has made him "a better man [j]. Stronger. My soul like—*steel*" (*Bird* 228, emphasis in the original). This could be interpreted as Edward making a sort of peace with himself by fighting to gain what he has lost, while at the same time avoiding the direct exertion of violence: when Lucille refuses to meet Edward and immediately calls the police, he is massacred without having fired a single shot.

There are other works by Oates in which we found equivalents to Edward Diehl's experience. For instance, in the novel *Do with Me*, Elena's father Leo Ross cannot, or will not, confront his removal from the family as a good-provider father. After his wife divorces him, he kidnaps his daughter and flees with her, in order to take revenge from his ex-wife. Taking care of the girl in their precarious and impoverished circumstances proves to be too complicated, and Leo starts to neglect

Elena, eventually abandoning her in their filthy apartment and disappearing.

Leo then becomes a fugitive on the run who contemplates suicide because he has lost everything: “What do you do when your money runs out? ĳyour luck? ĳyour manhood?” (*Do with Me* 454). Like Edward, he has lost everything that defined him as a man: he is no longer a remunerated worker, nor a custodial father or a husband; in short, he is unable to re-invent himself, and seems doomed to a tragic end. But then something unexpected occurs: he goes to see a movie that captivates him, and returns the following day, despite the danger of being recognized as a wanted fugitive. He is fascinated by the way in which one episode follows another in the film, perhaps more coherently than his own life’s events. In a fairy tale twist, Leo disappears from the cinema: he never goes out nor is he inside. He is never found. This is a fantastic twist to an otherwise realistic plot, which recalls Oates’s postmodernist romance novels. In this case, it appears to suggest that the role of the inflexible authoritarian father who resists transformation is doomed to disappear. This time, however, this is not done by the literal death of the father as in *Bird* or *Mulvaney’s*, but by means of a mysterious vanishment.

In *Bird*, it is only at the end of the novel when Krista can finally recognize the aggressiveness in Aaron and Edward. This occurs when, as an adult woman, Krista returns to Sparta with Aaron and learns that their mutual fathers were innocent of Zoe’s death. United by this enormous relief, they have sex, in a scene that proves that Krista still associates Aaron with her father: “I was kissing a mouth like Daddy’s mouth” (*Bird* 435).

This experience also allows her to realize and experience the male yearning for female domination and destruction that both men possess. As she reflects, Aaron is “like my father, a predator male” (*Bird* 349). She finally admits that this possessive tendency is destructive and dangerous, and rejects it since she realizes that Aaron can sooth his desire for her only by hurting her. Now, she concludes as well that her father’s love was “unconditional, unquestioning. Which did not mean that Daddy might not be cruel to me—but Daddy had loved me, so Daddy’s cruelty had been just a part of Daddy’s love” (*Bird* 408).

Sleeping with her father's surrogate figure brings Krista a certain sense of closure by recognizing the dangerous aspect of Edward's and Aaron's identities. She appears to be able to overcome her erotic fixation with her father, and move toward a more balanced and mature sexuality.

We might not conclusively assert that this brings complete resolution to Krista's Antigone phase; but in any case, she has gained a deeper knowledge about her bond to her father, and is now able to see him in a more realistic manner; and more importantly, to express her own needs and reject her past submissive attitude by refusing to submit to Aaron's sexuality and possible future control of her. Seeing reality more objectively, she is ready to leave this phase of her life behind: as she drives away from the town, she sees in her rear-view mirror—that is, already behind her—"the lights of Sparta [...] shimmering like a distant galaxy in the nighttime sky until it became occluded in the mist, and in the distance, and vanished from my sight" (*Bird* 442).

In Oates's works, there are more children who undergo similar experiences like those of Krista. One of them is the protagonist of "Four Summers" from *Wheel*, who according to Johnson, is forced to recognize that her father is not so confident and invulnerable as she thought and subsequently comes to recognize and reject his impulsive and dangerous behavior (*Short Fiction* 54). This story clearly depicts how the girl gradually contemplates her parents more objectively as she grows up. Like her, an adult Krista is able to grow up from her role as the obedient daughter and question her father's dominant position which is likely to beget violence.

#### 4.3.2.5 The Effects of Possessiveness: Jesse's Perusal of Shelley in *Wonderland*

In *Wonderland*, Jesse feels an unacknowledged incestuous attraction for Shelley, which starts to manifest early in her life:

Shelley had been born, Michele, an even lovelier child [than her sister], and Jesse had felt, helplessly, the deepest current of his love flowing out to her, a truly hot, glowing, illuminating passion that was like an intense beam of light,

out of his control. It was terrible, his love for her.  
(*Wonderland* 420)

Expressions such as “passion,” “intense,” and “out of control” seem to suggest Jesse’s erotization of Shelley. Jesse justifies this attraction by telling himself that his younger daughter is “softer, more vulnerable” (*Wonderland* 421) than his eldest, and therefore in need of protection, especially when she starts to behave more “rebelliously.” He is convinced then that he is acting for her own good.

Jesse’s incestuous feelings for Shelley are intensified as she grows up and enters puberty. They are also influenced by a crucial factor leading to a chain of events: Jesse’s conflictive distance from the human body, which he is not able to solve through the relationship with his wife Helen, or with his never-culminated affair with Reva Denk. Jesse remains obsessed with Reva when President John F. Kennedy is shot to death in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Kennedy’s assassination appears to mark the end of an era (Garraty 824), and certainly represents a crucial turning point in *Wonderland*: the solidification of Jesse’s obsession with Shelley and the girls’ initial realization, because, as Daly argues, while trying not to think of Reva, Jesse turns his passion instead to Shelley: his attempt to live a “pure” existence leads him to sexualize his daughter (61, 64).

The family is attending a conference at the time, and chaos unfolds when the news of the President’s death arrive: everybody rushes out of the room in panic. Eight-year-old Shelley heads toward her father, but then suddenly flees from him, and tries to escape his embrace when he finally catches her. The atmosphere of panic seems to awaken Shelley’s own fear of Jesse, and she starts screaming without being able to stop. Shelley evokes the incident in a letter written in 1970, asserting that she is still screaming: her fear of her father has obviously not subsided. Shelley’s rejection of Jesse was first manifested on this night, and seems to be based on the intuition of his obsession with her: by running away from him while terrified of the chaotic situation, she appears to be sensing that he could potentially hurt her.

Jesse is shocked about Shelley’s flight since, as Friedman explains, Shelley’s rejection of Jesse strikes at the root of his inadequacy: with her flight, she dissipates his myth of control (*Joyce* 109). Shelley is

challenging his authority as the head of the family. Jesse feels now inadequate to meet his high standards as a protective father, which proves that his dreams of perfection are a burden not only to his family but also to himself.

With the purpose of protecting his family, Jesse buys a gun: now his obsession has materialized in the specific, phallic form of a fire weapon. As Shelley grows up, Jesse grows increasingly paranoid about “protecting” her:

He had to prevent her from being misused by strangers, by men. The world could get at his daughter through the orifices of her body, pushing into the willing elastic streams of her blood, and she would smile dumbly, enticingly. (*Wonderland* 465)

What most worries Jesse is the possibility of Shelley having sexual contact with men. Jesse wants to control not only his own body, but also other people’s bodies. He thus places himself in the category of other discussed father-characters who cannot deal with their daughter’s sexual initiation: Carleton, Michael and Furlong.

Hence, Jesse cannot concentrate on his work because he keeps envisioning

not the girl Shelley, but rather the ghostly “scan” of his own brain, [...] a photograph of grainy oblong in which a certain area was heavily shaded by the radioactive isotope in form of his daughter’s face, like a tumor... located in the frontal region of his brain... (*Wonderland* 466)

First, we perceive how despite being an excellent economic provider for his family, Jesse is not satisfied (similarly to Elwood in *Expensive*). Second, the quotation proves Johnson’s opinion that Jesse projects the search for himself into Shelley. Therefore, Jesse perceives his vital struggle as internal; but Shelley, the most cherished part of himself, escapes his control. Jesse’s brain is the novel’s central symbol (*Understanding* 124, 133-134), and Jesse’s narcissism and wish for control leads him to locate his daughter into his own brain, interestingly,

as if she were a tumor that he submits to him just like the ones that he peels of his patients. This is also related to Shelley's belief that she was born of Jesse and not Helene, and represents an example of the monogenetic conception which patriarchy has employed to displace women from the power derived from their capacity of creating life.

Shelley also feels Jesse in her head: they seem to be intertwined in a manner which could be reminiscent of Dr. Pedersen and young Jesse; however, unlike them, neither the adult Jesse nor Shelley are satisfied about their bond, because Jesse wants her to stay a virgin, to stay at home, to protect her from harm, and for her to feel happy under his control; whereas Shelley becomes anguished about Jesse's mixture of dominance and love. Later on, she will write to him:

You were never home, but when you came home you wanted us there. Before you. Humbled before you. I did not dare stand straight, did not dare let you see how my body was growing. I did not dare risk your eyes on me. Your nervousness. Love lapping onto me like waves, like the warm waves of the pool you built for me. Then, after the pool was built, Mother said, "Your father wants you to use it every day, he doesn't want you wandering around. [j] " You were never home but when you came home you would sit at the edge of the pool and watch me swim, *oh I burned in the sunshine of your glare of your watching me; walking naked in front of any men now is no task, no risk for me, not after you.* (*Wonderland* 427, emphasis in the original)

Shelley's memories reveal Jesse's dominance over his family: he expects them to exist exclusively for him, to be waiting for him at home perpetually. Jesse builds the pool not for Shelley to enjoy, but to lure her home and to stare at her swimming. Shelley feels extremely distressed under her father's sexually threatening gaze. Jesse's ego has a dominating nature which denies other people's identities: he cannot healthily relate to others because he is perpetually trying to impose his will upon them.

As a result of Shelley's and Jesse's opposite pulls, the bond between them becomes a loop: Jesse's obsession feeds Shelley's

rejection of him; so she puts distance between them, which causes Jesse to become even more frantic. Thus, when Shelley is fourteen years old, she runs away for the first time and wanders for three days until she is picked up by a squad police car. When she is incarcerated, she refuses to give her name or to answer to it, something which Jesse will find disturbing: he is horrified to imagine (correctly) that she wanted to get away from him.

After Shelley is forcefully returned home, Jesse keeps on repelling her with his maniac behavior. One day, when Jesse cannot locate Shelley at a friend's house, he feels suddenly exhausted:

It was so hard to keep a family [...] that maybe it was better to give up. Better to give up, erase them all, destroy them, obliterate them and the memory of them, wipe everything out. A father could wipe out everything he had ever done and be free. A clean, pure, empty being, a void...  
(*Wonderland* 468)

First of all, Jesse is identifying “keeping a family” with constantly controlling the whereabouts of his relatives. In fact, the very expression, with its use of the verb “to keep,” seems to suggest “to retain,” that is, exerting some kind of imprisonment. But even more alarmingly, his thoughts seem to replicate his biological father's decision to kill his family. The murderous pull that other characters (such as Monk and Shelley) perceive in Jesse is starting to be more obviously manifested. In fact, the girl, feeling utterly anguished by her father's control, tells him: “You... you want to kill me...” (*Wonderland* 469).

Suddenly, Shelley runs away with a man named Noel. For Shelley, Noel represents the possibility of escaping her father; but he ends up introducing her in an unhealthy lifestyle which eventually makes her sick, and abusing her by forcing her into prostitution. It is ironical that Shelley has escaped the domination of one man to willingly place herself under the command of another one. According to Daly, this is caused by the fact that the girl has been conditioned to be the object of male's gaze (61).

Shelley and Noel travel around the country doing occasional seasonal jobs such as harvesting, joining the group of wandering



Oatesian characters from the corpus, along with Marianne Mulvaney and Cressida Mayfield. Due to their generally impoverished situation, they resemble Nadine and Jules's nomadic journey through Texas in *them*. As Daly explains, Shelley and Noel share their lifestyle with a group of people from the 1960s counterculture. The counterculture was integrated by a group of people commonly known as "hippies," who were so repelled by the modern world that they retreated from it. They found refuge in communes, drugs, mystical religions and often in wandering aimlessly from one place to another. Some of their most creative figures were the novelist Ken Kesey, and Allen Ginsberg, whose poem "Howl" (1955) was possibly the most widely read poem of the postwar period. The hippies developed a culture that was completely opposed to that of their parents: they rejected the old Protestant ethic, and did not care about money or material possessions, or power over others. For them, love was more important than money or influence, feelings more relevant than thought, and natural things superior to manufactured goods. They were also disgusted and horrified by the dishonesty of politicians, the Vietnam War, racism, and the smugness they saw at colleges. They believed in freedom of expression, tolerance, and peace; but they rejected activism, to the extent of being absolutely apolitical (Garraty 869-870).

Noel and Shelley's counterculture group of acquaintances is composed, in Daly's words, by war resisters, drug addicts, and other "criminals," whom Shelley considers her new "family." All these men have sexual relationships with her: she becomes their communal property (61). This stands in sharp contrast with the freedom they defend. The result is that Shelley has changed his oppressive nuclear Family System of Origin for a communal family, that in this case is equally domineering.

While travelling around the country with Noel, he presents her as his sister or his bride. Alternatively, Shelley adopts the role of mother for her counterculture family. The fact that family roles are so easily transformed and multiplied indicates a wish to transcend them, to reinterpret them according to new rules, or perhaps to no rules at all. Nevertheless, this apparent freedom from previous ties and roles does not prevent the harsh reality that Shelley is visibly sexually abused by

the men around her, because under Noel's urges, Shelley prostitutes herself. This points out to the sexist nature of the counterculture, a phenomenon highlighted by Noam Chomsky:

the youth movements of the 1960s, like the broader culture, were extremely sexist. [j] Young women who were part of the movement recognized there was something wrong with the fact that women were doing all the office work and so on, while the men were going around parading about how brave they were. They began to regard the young men as oppressors. And this was one of the main sources of the modern feminist movement, which really blossomed at the time. (157)

In *Wonderland*, this sexism begets violence. In Oates's words, both Shelley and Jesse's ex-friend Monk fall victim to "the grimly self-destructive yet intermittently radiant vision of The Sixties" ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 481). Indeed, Shelley's commitment to this alternative lifestyle seems imbued with a stereotypical independent "hippy" freedom reflected in her aimless drifting through the country; but it is soon perceived that such freedom hides a brutal and sordid reality. In Bender's words, Noel debases Shelley in the name of revolution. Oates exposes thus the mystical awareness of the radical youth movements as a fraudulent mask hiding hatred. She suggests that the mass consciousness born in the campuses of the 1960s is a counterfeit rather than a true conversion of the spirit, and that it might be even more dangerous than the old mythologies. Oates voices here a conservative view (65-66).

Noel's relationship with Shelley oscillates then between providing comfort and producing damage: he brings solace to her, and he is the one who suggests that she should write home; but he also forces her to have sexual relationships with other men. Besides, he objectifies her by calling her "the Fetish" (referring to her in the third person) and asserting that she belongs to him, and that "the Fetish must be humiliated" (*Wonderland* 425). The nickname "Fetish" evokes the lustful gaze of a man over her. Shelley passively accepts Noel's dominance, which points out to her disturbed emotional state.

The Fetish becomes thus an external part of Shelley, created by Noel. It is not to be compared to other doppelgangers such as Dr. Vogel/Jesse and Krull/Aaron, since it does not, first, stem from herself; nor second, represent her anger or dominating nature. It is just an empty carcass: it is no coincidence that Noel also calls her “Shell,” which reflects this nothingness. In fact, Noel consciously constructs the Fetish by convincing Shelley that she does not exist with the objective of, he argues, easing her pain. This is accomplished by means of violence, namely, by forcing her into prostitution: “Noel made me pure, like a madonna, like an angel... He brought so many men to me to make pure again, to make me into nothing. He made me free [...] he made my body float free of everything” (*Wonderland* 50). Shelley does not allude to the abusive nature of this purification but refers to it in benign terms. Noel proclaims: “I made her nothing at all, I ground her down to nothing and freed her! She didn’t even know her name when I was through!” (*Wonderland* 502). Therefore, following Martin et al.’s vision of identity (exposed in the next chapter), we might assert that Shelley’s agency has also completely been taken over by Noel, to the extent that she denies the existence of her own self. Despite this, Shelley does not absolutely renounce her self-awareness.

The conviction that purification entails having sex with many men and becoming empty suggests self-rejection in Shelley: she is trying to erase her previous identity as Jesse’s daughter with the assistance of Noel. The name Noel comes from the French word “Noël” meaning “Christmas,” which can be traced back to Latin “natalis,” which means “birthday” or, as an adjective, “of or relating to birth” (“Noel” n. p.). Thus, in the novel, Noel is offering Shelley the opportunity of being born again as a route of escape from her constraining family ties, but his strategy paradoxically implies her annulment as a person.

The family, as we have often stated, may become a source of oppression for its members. For adolescents, running away from home may be appealing as a liberation from excessive authority and a suitable and positive manner to find their own autonomous identity. But as we have mentioned in the chapter “Parents,” this is usually a fallacy, because many of these teenagers eventually become chained to other

figures or objects: in the case of Shelley, these elements are her lover and drugs.

The solution in these cases would be finding a balance between family ties and roles, and a person's own identity; that is, to be able to integrate these traits in a harmonious manner and thus become, simultaneously, a father/mother/child as well as oneself. In the corpus, this has proved to be consistently arduous. For instance, Shelley's mother Helene reduces her whole identity (or rather, has her identity reduced) to her role of mother/wife; whereas Shelley is in the opposite case: the identity that becomes more difficult for her to integrate is that of a daughter. More specifically, Shelley finds difficulties when trying to achieve a balance between her self and her family role as a daughter because she has grown up between two opposed attitudes that, combined, hinder her attempts at self-definition. The reasons for this are mainly found in her parents' treatment of her: while her mother mostly ignores her, not giving her the appropriate encouragement to become an independent woman because she had not received such tools either; Jesse wants to reduce Shelley's identity exclusively to her facet as a daughter, forsaking then the rest of her self.

When Jesse finds the couple in Canada, Noel also asserts that he does not exist, and he does not possess a soul. This assertion (which is highly nihilist, as explained in the chapter "Children") may stem from the dissatisfaction of the youth of the 1960s and their wish to cut the ties from their elders' traditional way of life, to escape from the multiple abuses that their progenitors inflict upon them; or perhaps to sever their ties to the world in general, or rather, with themselves in particular.<sup>31</sup> In

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<sup>31</sup> The decade featured two main dilemmas that caused enormous frustration to Americans. First, progress was often self-defeating: for instance, cities, built to bring comfort and culture to people, became focuses of crime and poverty. Some parents tried to transmit to their children the accumulated wisdom of their years, but their advice was rejected, often understandably: that wisdom had little to do with the problems that their children faced. The second problem was that modern industrial society placed an enormous premium on social cooperation; but at the same time, it undermined the individual's sense of being essential to the proper functioning of society. Few people felt that their individual voices had much effect on public policies. They tried to solve this dilemma by joining organizations aimed at achieving particular goals, like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People); but those groups commonly became so huge that their members felt as unable of influencing them as they felt in larger society (Garraty 815, 858-859).

sum, both Shelley's and Noel's denial of existence expresses an utter feeling of exhaustion with the world around them. Shelley's denial is aimed, too, at trying to hide from Jesse. Besides, it is also clearly influenced by her father's destruction of her self-confidence.

The motive of liberation through violence and sex frequently appears in the corpus, but in this case the effectiveness of such liberation is highly questionable. Besides, this violence is usually projected upon others, as in *them*, where Jules murders a policeman; but in the case of Shelley, violence is exclusively projected into herself. As a result, we cannot consider that she actually undergoes any liberation: in fact, her abusive and unhealthy lifestyle eventually contributes to her death (at least in the original version of *Wonderland*).

But Shelley does not totally renounce to be Jesse's daughter, as proved by the letters she writes to him, which eventually lead her father to her: she is thus trying to negotiate her role both as a daughter and an independent young woman. Her conflicting emotions are expressed in her letters: "The voice must say I love you. If it does not say *I love you* it is not an authentic voice. [...] *Father, I want to come home*—no, that isn't my voice and it isn't Noel's, don't listen to that voice—" (*Wonderland* 403, emphasis in the original). Through her letters, Shelley shows her preoccupation with the riddle of existence. She evokes Jesse's insistence on talking in complete sentences and communicating complete thoughts, and concludes that it is impossible to be a complete being:

What is a complete thought? I am not a complete thought.  
Not in my head or anyone else's. [...] To be a complete  
thought you have to come to the end of yourself, you have  
to see your own birth and your own death, summed up.  
(*Wonderland* 427)

Shelley's recognition of the impossibility of being complete recalls the composition of Jesse's self, highly influenced by his father-figures. Most relevantly, Shelley is acknowledging here the fragmentation of human beings and the impossibility of defining what identity is in any definite manner, which is one of the main points that the novel makes.

Besides, the quotation reveals that Shelley does not let Noel completely suppress her self-awareness.

The last scene of the novel begins when Jesse finally locates Shelley and Noel in Yonge Street, Toronto, Canada. Jesse is shocked to see the drugged youths, confused, ill, impoverished and paranoid, living cramped in what Showalter describes as “an ironically hellish haven for the drugged young” (“Quartet” xxiii). Oates, echoing Jesse’s perception, remarks that in Yonge street, “the drug-addicted young, moribund, unsexed, affectless, begging from strangers, have ‘the appearance of victims of war.’ [j] A ‘street of the young’ in any large North American city, in those days” (“Afterword” *Wonderland* 2006, 481). The couple is living with some other addicted people in a filthy apartment. At first, Jesse does not recognize Shelley: she is so thin and her hair is so short that he mistakes her for a young boy. This scene is paralleled in *Mulvaney*, when Patrick mistakes his sister Marianne for a boy.

Shelley, severely ill with jaundice and possibly hepatitis, refuses to accompany her father, saying that she does not exist and so he cannot take her away. Noel’s strategy to help Shelley confront pain by convincing her that she does not exist has proved too much effective: she eventually feels that she is absolutely nothing, and she uses this argument to try to hide from Jesse, a sentence that according to Friedman permeates Shelley’s feelings of insecurity caused by her father’s harassment (*Joyce* 95). Shelley also tells Jesse that she is now living with a new family, and thus cannot go back with him: “Noel is my husband here—not you—never you—when I have a baby it will be for all of them here, and not you” (*Wonderland* 500). She is directly alluding to Jesse’s incestuous propensities, while at the same time expressing her adherence to a new mode of communal family which is very distant from Jesse’s traditional, nuclear and patriarchal conception of the family. Besides, Shelley is intentionally using her ill, emaciated body to become unattractive and thus repel the sexual advances of her father. In this case, anorexia works as a defense against unwanted sexual proposals. Daly contemplates the state of Shelley’s body in the wider context of the 1960s youth:

In the body of Shelley, Oates illustrates the terrible consequences of patriarchy's oppression of women. [j] The children of Shelley's generation perceive that they are being destroyed by society; and effectively, they have fled from home to avoid being sacrificed by their fathers to war or to sexual abuse. (64)

Noel confronts Jesse, insisting that Shelley belongs to him. Both Noel and Jesse fight over Shelley as if she were a piece of flesh to be owned, used or misused, and disposed of. Again, women are considered the property of their fathers or lovers. In Johnson's words, the search for Shelley becomes in Jesse's mind a struggle with the forces of darkness and chaos symbolized by Noel, forces over which he must exert control (*Understanding* 135). Jesse briefly fantasizes about shooting Noel, but also contemplates the consequences of such act: he perceives that Noel is starting to relent from his defense of Shelley and that killing him will not change anything, and so he refrains from it. He is thus distancing from his father Willard by renouncing to claim possession of his daughter by means of violence.

This is the point from which the ending scenes diverge in the two editions of *Wonderland*. Besides, in the original version, the novel opens with a text that anticipates and retells a certain episode from the ending (Shelley trying to escape from Jesse after he finds her), which was suppressed from the corrected version.

In the original version of the novel, published in 1971, Shelley becomes a literal object of exchange for the two men by being bought from one and given to the other. Jesse offers Noel five hundred dollars in exchange for his daughter, and Noel accepts them, saying: "Five hundred dollars... for my bride, my sweet little Angel... my Shell... Five hundred dollars is what they pay you for your cadaver at the medical schools" (*Wonderland* 503). His words are terribly accurate, since Shelley is moribund. Moreover, Noel is obviously making Gothic allusions by depicting Jesse as feeling as delusively omnipotent as Dr. Victor Frankenstein from Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), who deems himself entitled to conduct experiments that surpass the natural barriers of the living and the dead.

In fact, we find several similitudes between Jesse and the Frankenstein described in Oates's article "Frankenstein's Fallen Angel," compiled in the collection of essays *Woman*. Oates explains how Frankenstein denies his responsibility over the creation and subsequent rejection of the monster despite being "haunted by the suspicion [j] that he has committed a crime of some sort, with the very best of intentions" (*Woman* 120). Similarly, Jesse does not admit his role in his daughter's flight from home: he is convinced that he has acted with the best intentions in mind (that is, trying to protect Shelley from harm).

The conclusion of Oates's article could be applied to Jesse, since Oates argues that Shelley's novel is "a remarkably acute diagnosis of the lethal nature of *denial*: denial of responsibility for one's actions, denial of the shadow self locked within consciousness" (*Woman* 122, emphasis in the original). Certainly, Jesse's approach to life involves several stages of denial: denial of his violent past; denial of the body's instincts and involuntary processes; denial of the autonomy of others, etc.

Moreover, Shelley somehow resembles the description that Oates makes of the monster in her article: like him, she has an appalling appearance, yellow skin, and shriveled countenance (*Woman* 107); and like him, she is perused by the very person who gave life to her. Perhaps, it is not a coincidence that Oates's character is named Shelley, precisely spelt as the surname of *Frankenstein's* author Mary Shelley. It is also interesting that the author is the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and William Godwin. Just like the writer could not have a relationship with her mother, who died shortly after she was born, in *Wonderland*, Shelley's relationship to Helene is practically non-existing; and her relation to Jesse is troubled, just as Mary Shelley's bond to her father.

Noel embodies the motive of "death and the maiden," which also features Oates's famous short story "Where" (in fact, "Death and the Maiden" was precisely the story's working title). The trope of death and the maiden, rooted in Persephone's myth, became prominent in the German Renaissance, as Pollefeys explains. It involves a figure of death



grabbing or stalking a beautiful young woman, and suggests a dark bound between sexuality and mortality, and the fact that beauty is doomed to decay. The maiden, usually unaware of this reality, is commonly represented looking away from death (n. p.). We should not forget, either, that for Edgar Allan Poe, “the death [j] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (436), as stated in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846).

The destructive nature of Noel as the figure of death is reflected in his (most probably) providing drugs to Shelley and forcing her into sexual relationships with several men, which has put her into risky situations and caused her to become ill with hepatitis and jaundice. Therefore, the female protagonist is taken away from home (even if it is willingly) by a demonic lover, and later on rescued by her father, who comes to “carry” her “off” (*Wheel* 187), not necessarily to a better place. She is therefore “forced into the role of [...] Gothic heroine[s], dependent on male intervention” (Showalter “Quartet” xxiv).

It is severely implied that Shelley will not survive the night. As Daly explains, Shelley represents an entire generation of Americans who were sacrificed in the Vietnam War, which was maintained, in Bakhtin’s terms, by an official or monologic consciousness. Jesse, with his scientific education, is depicted in this ending as a king Lear carrying the dead body of his daughter as he grieves for the sacrifice of his (male) ego (48). It is relevant to point out that the ending does not reveal whether Shelley survives, although it is heavily implied that she does not: we only learn that Jesse, dragging Shelley along, impulsively embarks a small boat at Lake Ontario which is rescued in the morning.

The revised version of *Wonderland*, published in 1973, offers a new resolution to the plot, in which Jesse exhibits a greater degree of control over the situation. Oates explains the reasons for this alteration: “*Wonderland* could not end with a small boat drifting helplessly [j] i t had to end with a gesture of demonic-paternal control” (“Conversations” 187). She further elaborates on this decision:

I quite deliberately forced the first ending of my novel *Wonderland*, wanting it to confront to a preordained structure, a kind of American tragedy of the isolated ego. I sensed it was not the true ending, but I wrote it anyway.

And that was the only novel of mine which, after publication, caused me distress [...] [I] had to go back to write the true ending [...] I felt that I had unleashed a kind of perverted, misrepresentative horror upon the world [j] I receive letters every day [j] and the nature of the letters concerning *Wonderland* was such that I could see very clearly the direct, moral connections we have with one another, to present the truth, at least, not to willfully distort anything. So I believe I am more aware of the psychological connections between people than others are [j] This has the effect of making me feel that I must never distort in any rational or “aesthetic” manner what I write; it must be a sincere expression of my deeper self, no matter that it might seem strange or distasteful to the ego... (“Correspondence” 62)

Another related reason for the change is the mystical experience Oates underwent, which led her to a new philosophical conception that rejected the classical sovereignty of the ego in favor of a more democratic and harmonious vision that allowed all voices to be heard. This occurred after the publication of *Wonderland*, and she decided to change the end to accommodate it to her new views.

In the novel, the perspective focuses on Jesse, who represents an absolute “I” that fights to suppress the voices of his family and friends in order to be the only prevailing will: he is an isolated ego who cannot find out how to relate to others. These silenced voices are most notably represented by Shelley, who struggles to find a place to express herself, and tries to do so through her letters to her father. However, in the original version, her voice is silenced in the end by the domineering manners of her father; as well as by her destructive illness, and eventually by death. Shelley dies a victim of the excesses of an ego that believes itself omnipotent: Jesse’s. The decision to silence her is motivated by Oates’s initial wish to present a thematically unified work that featured the terrible consequences of the isolation of the self.

In this new edition, Jesse reaffirms his position as the domineering father; but the novel is not so heavily focused on his status as an isolated ego, because it lets Shelley’s voice be heard: she is not silenced by death, as in the previous version. The last scene, much shorter than the

original, is developed as follows. Jesse lets a frightened Noel escape, and then carries Shelley away, while she tries to fight her father's grip, but eventually resigns to his will. Despite her subdued position, in this version Shelley survives.

Oates has written three pieces featuring girls who share parallel experiences to Jesse and Shelley Vogel's experience: the short stories "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again" and "A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean," and the theater play *Ontological Proof of My Existence*.<sup>32</sup>

The teenage protagonists, daughters living in the 1960s, search for an alternative lifestyle differentiated from their parents' comfortable and bourgeois lives. Apart from this, the girl from *Ontological* (named Shelley too), flees from her father's oppression like Shelley from *Wonderland*. In her own words, "He kept after me with his love, he wanted to own me [...] he was always spying on me! He wouldn't let me alone! He loved me too much!" (*Ontological* 34).

After running away, the girls fall into a world of drugs, abuse and forced prostitution due to the influence of male characters that take advantage of them. In the end, they are "rescued" by their fathers or the police and compelled to go back to their bourgeois lives and urged to forget the past; except in the case of *Ontological*, where the girl refuses to return home.

The imposition of forgetfulness upon a past trauma is extremely dangerous to the subject: according to psychoanalytic sources like Abraham and Torok, recognition and verbalization of the events is an essential step for a recovery. This problem is turned into a metaphor in "Girl at the Edge," where the protagonist, Tessa, is forced to swallow her trauma just as she feels compelled to eat, an act that she dislikes: she feels that the food becomes a heavy rock inside her stomach, just like the topics she is not allowed to discuss/digest.

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<sup>32</sup> Hereafter cited in text as "How," "Girl at the Edge" and *Ontological*, respectively. "How," compiled in the collection *Wheel*, was first published in 1969, two years before the publication of *Wonderland*; "Girl at the Edge" belongs to the collection *Goddess* (1974); and *Ontological* was published in 1970 and first performed at the Cubiculo Theater of New York City on February 3, 1972, directed by Maurice Edwards. In 1980, it was compiled in the collection *Three Plays*, along with *Miracle Play* and *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey*.

These works echo the historical context of the 1960s, when the generational conflict turned into a conflict of lifestyles, translated into the youngsters' rejection of urban conformism, hypocrisy, and renunciation of freedom; as well as into the appearance of protest movements, as Oates confirms while describing "How" ("*Carthage Fitzgerald*" n. p.). In feminist terms, we detect the female protagonists' incapacity to overcome fatherly authority. As mentioned, the protest movements of the 1960s were utterly sexist and did not, in general, propose any feasible alternatives to patriarchy, but simply reproduced its thesis.

Despite holding similar plots, the three stories end in somehow different notes. In "How," the girl makes an effort to make sense of her experience (the story takes the form of an essay she writes for school narrating what has happened to her). This re-confinement to the life she has fled from is seen as rather positive by Oates, who affirms that the girl is probably not going to be included again into the hypocrisy of the adults around her ("*Carthage Fitzgerald*" n. p.), possibly because she has gained a new perspective over life, as the title of the story indicates.

In "Girl at the Edge," Tessa is sent to a family holiday house to recover from her experience, but she keeps on thinking about her past violent life, which she alternatively fears and misses. According to Waller, the security and isolation of the house function as a shell that must be broken in order to attain any growth, since Oatesian female characters have to make some radical act of the whole integral personality to discover their true inner direction (*Dreaming* 19-20).

Finally, *Ontological* evokes the scene from *Wonderland* in which Jesse finds his runaway daughter in the company of her abuser and procurer, Peter. Just like the Shelley from *Wonderland*, this Shelley does not perceive Peter's violence but assures that he has saved her by hiding her from her father's domination and convincing her that she does not exist. She had initially seemed determined to recover her self-esteem and validate her experience by demonstrating that she exists, but her initially powerful voice, which opens the play, is eventually suffocated by that of her father, her lover/procurer and a man to whom she is sold.

As Bender concludes, *Ontological* is a parable of the divided self. The main character lacks a mirror to confirm her existence, or at least provide a shape to her terror. It is suggested that she is a jigsaw puzzle waiting to be put together by the men in her life. Oates dramatizes the self's surrender to authority, and warns that this occurs at a great risk (65). This is also what we find in *Wonderland's* Shelley.

#### 4.3.2.6 Conclusion to Father and Daughter Subsystem

After having analyzed father and daughter relationships, it might be concluded that these five girls are betrayed by their fathers in different ways: Clara, Maureen, Marianne and Shelley are punished or persecuted for perceived sexual misbehaviors and for supposedly challenging their fathers' rules; in contrast, Krista's safety is endangered by her father's obsession to regain his position in the family.

Curiously, three of the fathers, Carleton, Michael and Furlong, think that they have been betrayed by their daughters because they perceive that the girls have disappointed, deceived or wronged them. The reason for this may be found in the fact that they expect their authority as Fathers to be respected regardless of their own behavior.<sup>33</sup> In short, all the five fathers eventually place other interests before the girls' well-being: Carleton, Furlong and Michael favor their prejudices about sex and possessiveness, and Edward chooses his personal aims over Krista's safety.

As Krista herself bitterly notices "a mistake you must learn not to make, to confuse Daddy's love for you with Daddy's respect for you. A child is loved but not respected" (*Bird* 233). Certainly, these men did not show much respect for their daughters; on the contrary: they have put them at risk by either directly hurting them as Carleton and Furlong do, or forcing them into (potentially) physically or emotionally hurtful situations like Marianne's banishment from home, Krista's abduction and Shelley's flight.

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<sup>33</sup> This unwritten patriarchal rule is quoted in Oates's novel *The Man Without a Shadow* (2016), where the female neuropsychologist protagonist has a submissive relationship with her male mentor/lover: "The Chaste Daughter does not betray the Father. Even when the Father has betrayed her, the Chaste Daughter does not betray" (*The Man Without a Shadow* 96).

From a more general point of view, the fathers (particularly Jesse) are more interested in maintaining their position as heads of their nuclear families than on preserving their bond to their daughters, which is somehow inconsistent of them, because in order to maintain this position as heads of the family, they eventually break one of the basic principles of that position: they fail to protect their daughters.

After violence erupts in *Garden*, *Mulvaney*s and *them*, those relationships are forever altered. The daughters have diverse reactions to this: Clara and Maureen strive to assert their independence and Marianne strives for reconciliation and for her father to accept her new self. In *Bird*, Krista is willing to obey her father at all costs, but her perception of him will change as she grows up. Finally, in *Wonderland*, Jesse stalks his daughter to the extent that she runs away from him. Moreover, all the fathers, except Furlong and Jesse, are literally destroyed following these eruptions, as a direct consequence of them.

In summary, it may be asserted that one of the reasons for the fathers' behavior is their lack of imagination and flexibility when perceiving their daughters, which prevents them from facing their transformations in constructive manners; since as Oates has asserted, love implies the constant re-imagining of the love object (which could be described, in Abraham and Torok's words, as a process of introjection of the changes experienced by such love object). In these novels, the fathers fail to integrate the alterations that the daughters undergo, and become stuck in a past that they conceive as ideal, as well as to their inflexible functions as the GPR, which they are not willing to relinquish.

They subsequently fight to recover that past or to prevent the changes that their daughters and families undergo, not realizing that this would be impossible: Clara, Maureen and Marianne cannot go back to being virgins (although Clara has not had sexual relationships, her father is convinced of it); Maureen cannot erase her phase working as a prostitute; Edward cannot live with his family again as if he had never been unfaithful to his wife or a suspect in his lover's murder; and Shelley cannot possibly turn into the submissive, virginal daughter that Jesse dreams of. This points out a common characteristic of the male characters of the corpus: they are less able to adapt to change than

female characters are. Even Zeno from *Carthage*, the least traditional of the fathers of the corpus, is unable to move on after Cressida's disappearance or to accept her death.

The fathers refuse to let the girls acquire their own voice to express their wishes. They have diverse reactions which are nonetheless unrealistically aimed at keeping the girls close to them and immobilized in their former state: Carleton starts a fruitless perusal of Clara to bring her back home; Furlong assaults Maureen when he interprets her prostitution as a challenge to his authority as the family's provider and as a rejection of him; Michael loses his beloved Marianne when, after her rape, she ceases to match his image of the perfect daughter; Edward, dispossessed of his role as custodial father and husband, abducts Krista; and Jesse with his obsessive control over his daughter indirectly drives her into sickness and death.

This is related to these fathers' inability to face changes; or, in Abraham and Torok's terms, to introject them. These four men are obsessed with keeping their role as protective fathers and rulers of their families at any cost; ironically, even at the cost of a beloved member of the family like a daughter. This obsession stems from their fixation upon a patriarchal nuclear family, whose rigidity is reflected in the very rigidity that the characters exhibit when facing changes: they resist the evolution and development of their family systems. The result is that they are permanently expelled from them as a result of their actions.

This feeling of possessiveness which characterizes these father-daughter relationships is also present in the mother-son subsystem. Significantly, though, in the latter case the sons play the domineering part instead of the mothers. It might be concluded, then, that these male participants feel entitled to possess the female counterparts within a parent-child subsystem, disregarding who is older or in a supposed superior position of authority.

#### **4.3.3 Father-Son Subsystem**

Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke highlight that in mythology, there are many references to fathers who are absent, aggressive, emotionless, resentful or at least willing to let their sons at the mercy of their mothers: Cronos devoured his son, Laius ordered to get him killed, Abraham was

willing to sacrifice him. This may be explained by the fact that the father-son relationship exemplifies basic societal issues such as power sharing, intergenerational conflicts and rivalry (54, 170). Similarly, the corpus presents equally destructive father-son relationships.

In the corpus, father-son relationships are generally much colder than father-daughter relationships. For the most part, fathers range from being indifferent to their sons to directly putting them in danger or harming them. In *them*, the father is emotionally distant to his son; in *Mulvaney's*, the father is initially close to their sons but will eventually reject and harm them; whereas in *Expensive*, Elwood shows affection for his son Richard but is generally rebuffed by him.

In all these novels, fathers assume in a more or less successful way the role of breadwinner of the family, which means that as in the case of the father-daughter relationships, they see their families as traditional nuclear families within a patriarchal ideology. This determines their relationship with their sons: in *Expensive* the father's success as the main economic provider of the family is proportional to the affective distance that separates him from his son; in contrast, in *them*, it is the father's failure to provide economic wellbeing to his family that determines his lack of commitment with his son; and *Mulvaney's* shows the destructive effects ensuing from the father's inability to cope with the abrupt end of the ideal family balance.

#### 4.3.3.1 Fathers in the Distance: Success and Failure as Distancing Devices in *Expensive People* and *them*

*Expensive* and *them* present cold and detached father-son relationships in contrasting socio-economic environments. Both novels are settled in Detroit, but whereas *Expensive* reflects the lifestyle of the wealthy suburbs, *them* is placed in the slums. In the former, the father-son subsystem is analyzed in the characters of Elwood and Richard, whereas in the latter, we shall examine the bond between Howard and Jules. The reason for choosing Howard for this discussion over Bernie or Furlong is that, although Jules's biological father may be either Howard or Bernie, Jules never learns of this; and his relationship with his stepfather Furlong is only briefly described in the novel.



*Expensive*, centered on Richard's relationship to his mother, places the father Elwood in the background. He is often away from home due to his job, so in practice, he resembles a non-custodial parent: in fact, he will eventually transform into a category of these fathers, the "Disneyland Daddy," as we shall explain next.

In general, Elwood comes across as a rather superficial character, mainly defined by his series of high-paying jobs. His constant promotion through diverse firms is remarkable: it adds to the theme of mobility in the novel, along with his constant business travels. All the mobility of this novel, Grant says, is motivated by economic gains. For the expensive people, dislocation means that all places and homes are alike (81, 83). That is, the characters are not emotionally attached to a place: they interpret houses and neighborhoods as symbols of economic status and appearances. This mobility is also perceived in Nada's escalating of the social ladder; a trope which is repeated in Clara from *Garden*. Ironically, the Walpoles and the Everetts, despite being in opposite ends of the social scale, suffer from the same problem: rootlessness.

Elwood is thus one of the few fathers that fulfils the breadwinner role in a flawless manner: he dedicates most of his time to work so that his family has everything they need. The Everetts' purchasing power is extremely high, and this validates him within their wealthy community. In his case, the fact that his wife Nada works is humiliating for him but not because it diminishes his earning capability as a man (for he has a high salary and Nada does not work out of economic need); but because Nada's is an intellectual job that puts into question, he feels, his own intellectual aptitudes. Nada also blatantly downplays his education. Somehow, this indirectly questions his worth as the head of the family. This is the reason why, as a rebuke, he often despises his wife's literary circle.

Despite Elwood's obvious success in exerting the GPR, Richard describes him as clumsy and rather simple-minded; this is represented by his high quality but always rumpled clothes. At times, we see glimpses of Elwood's dissatisfaction with his demanding life style, and hear him complaining about its meaningfulness, which points at some of the costs of the GPR. This suggests that, despite being presented as

a rather shallow character, perhaps Elwood is much more complex than he appears to be through the perspective of the narrator, his son Richard.

Elwood is not totally unconcerned about Richard, but has a rather stiff bond with him, sometimes appearing to forget that he is just a child and talking with him about age-inappropriate subjects. Richard is used to having this mostly detached bond and does not really search for intimacy with him: his attitude to his father shifts among being ashamed, mocking and unconcerned about him. He considers him inferior to Nada.

In fact, Richard has a curious notion about his father for most of the novel; he is convinced that he is not actually his father:

while I loved Father I did not really believe he was my father. All my life I had visions of another man, my true father, and while he might appear in the body of the father I had been stuck with, his voice, his personality, and his soul were entirely different [...] I thought that another father might be waiting somewhere off in the wings and that at the next cocktail party, if I listened hard and crept as close to the living room as I dared, I might hear the strong, hard, even brutal voice of my true father.  
(*Expensive* 21-22)

This gives us clues as to what kind of father Richard prefers: one who is more assertive, authoritarian, and even somewhat aggressive. Richard seems to wish for a more traditionally nuclear family, with a mother who is totally dedicated to the private sphere and a father who is the indisputable head of the household. Despite the fact that Elwood would qualify as the head of the family due to his perfect execution of the GPR, Richard feels that he is not authoritarian enough, possibly because Nada does not fit, either, into the role of a submissive mother/wife. Nada's attitude is the main obstacle for Richard's dream of having a traditional nuclear family: the mother/wife does not comply to her role, thus turning into infeasible the possibility of having a rigid family structure, because with her attitude she is preventing the rest of the members of the family to wholly assume their traditional roles.

What Richard does not appear to realize is that his father is indeed as he wishes. Elwood's generally friendly attitude, Johnson remarks, conceals his primitive drive to compete and destroy (*Understanding* 54). He cannot bear to lose at anything, nor even at a bowling game. This competitiveness is precisely the trait that has allowed Elwood to obtain his well-paid high-ranking jobs, and to become a successful good-provider.

The perfect performance as an apt provider comes to the detriment of Elwood's emotional bond to his son, not because the father does not wish for such a bond, but because his frequent absence from home limits his contact with him. He tries to bring about that proximity by insisting on receiving a more affectionate name: "Cut out that Father business, I'm your Dad. Daddy" (*Expensive* 130). This is unsuccessful, though: Richard keeps on saying "Father."

When Nada abandons the family, Elwood comes to the foreground by being the only parent in the household. Feeling brokenhearted over Nada's absence, he becomes rather affectionate toward Richard: he takes him out to restaurants and the cinema, and even encourages him to openly discuss his feelings. But none of these efforts can hide the fact that Elwood and Richard are mostly strangers; and thus, this fleeting intimacy does not result in an everlasting connection between them.

At this time, Elwood resembles one of Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke (95) labels for non-custodial fathers: "Disneyland daddies." These fathers take their children to all types of leisure activities (zoos, cinema, restaurants, ball games, etc.) instead of addressing the more complex task of dealing with them more personally. Since they have limited time with the children, they try to have as much fun as possible with them. In this case, Elwood clearly has good intentions: he is trying to ease the pain of Nada's abandonment, while also attempting to provide Richard with emotional support, but he does not always find the best method to achieve his goals. For instance, one of his tactless attempts at being honest with his child becomes a rant against his wife in which he bluntly tells Richard about the abortion she had considered having while pregnant with him. Elwood thus tries, and fails, to embody the "Daddy" (as he insists on being called) he would like to be.

According to Grant, it is precisely in the period when father and son live alone that Richard realizes that Elwood is “nothing”: the desk and pens, the buzzer system and secretaries, the titles and promotions have not created a person (50). Grant’s assertion instantly reminds us of Richard’s appreciation that his mother “Nada” is “nothing” as well. We might wonder if Elwood is indeed so shallow or whether this is simply Richard’s perception of a mostly absent father, or, most probably, his mocking critique to his father due to his inability to become the real head of the household. In any case, Elwood’s shallowness, like Nada’s, perfectly fits their superficial and hypocritical social class where appearances are of the utmost relevance.

At the end, Elwood is listening to the “Symphony for Silence,” which symbolizes the value of his activities, Friedman remarks (*Joyce* 62). It would appear that his job has not created a real professional but a caricature of a businessman, as Johnson perceives (*Understanding* 54), so focused upon his public role that he is unable to create a solid bond with his son. His favoring of his GPR turns him into an emotionally distant father. Therefore, during the interlude of Nada’s abandonment, Elwood cannot really act as a father.

Richard finally considers Elwood his true father when at the end of the novel, after Nada’s death, he engages another woman, Mavis Grisell. Noticing his son’s displeasure upon the news, he shouts at him:

Look, you little brat, you neurotic little nut, I’m through with all this horseshit! Mavis is going to be your new mother, and you don’t like it you can go to hell! [...] from now on things are going to be different. It’s not happy, forgiving Elwood *Daddy*—it’s going to be your *Father* whom you are going to respect, Buster, or get the hell out, I don’t care how young you are or how nuts. (*Expensive* 234, emphasis in the original)

Here, Elwood seems to become everything that Richard wanted: a rigid, authoritarian father, who even demands to be addressed with the vocative “Father” he had been rejecting until this point. This marks Elwood’s final renunciation to attain a close bond with his son. But Richard is not shocked about his father’s harsh manners, on the

contrary: “I recognized then my real father, who was shouting at me out of that familiar man’s face” (*Expensive* 234). This situation has two main effects. First, it represents, ironically, the beginning of the end of the father-son relationship: they shall only grow increasingly distant. Richard’s wish was one of rigidity and separation, and it has become true. The second effect is the reduction of their bond (which is waning for most of the novel) to a mere economic transaction. At the end, as Boesenberg notices, the only connection between Richard and Elwood is money, an omnipresent trope in the novel: he gives him a monthly assignation (382). Elwood has limited all the connection to his child to the economic function, disregarding all the others. As noticed, money comes as a substitute for other forms of close human interaction in the novel. Elwood has then been totally reduced to his breadwinner role, a simple source of economic support for his child.

In contrast with Elwood’s socioeconomic success, in *them*, Howard’s development is characterized by failure: he is fired from the police for taking bribes, and subsequently is out of job for extended periods of time. He has failed to be a good-provider. He maintains a detached attitude toward all his children, who are not fond of him, for he is a distant and conflictive man who often gets drunk and abuses his family. Very possibly, he is trying to exert his authority by means of violence because he is not able to exert it by means of his capacity to maintain the family. Besides, this proves, once more, that homes are not always shelters for its members but arenas of violence and fear.

Howard is practically unresponsive at an emotional level, even when he is sober. Besides, he is silent most of the time, a recurrent trait in the male characters of the corpus. In *them*, this phenomenon is explicitly called “masculine silence” (*them* 62), a label which shall be adopted to refer to this peculiarity in Oates’s work from this point on. This type of silence is also perceived in *Wonderland*. Masculine silence is usually a result of the characters’ introverted nature, inability to express their emotions, or a wish to remain uninvolved in certain events or to distort them. Besides, silence is used, ironically, as a tool of power, which has traditionally been associated with speech.

In *them*, Loretta profoundly resents the silent attitude of her husband and her father-in-law: “her people were anonymous,

backward, exasperating, Howard in his silence and Papa Wendall with his radio" (*them* 62). For her, silence turns them into undefined persons. Most specifically, Howard's silence seems to deny his very existence: "Howard, gone off to the war, was no more silent in his absence than he had been at home" (*them* 64). Later on, Howard also appears to be growing deaf, or, as Jules suspects, wishing not to hear. Just as in the case of Mr. Wreszin from the short story "Ruth," who does neither talk nor listen, Howard seems to use silence as a strategy to dodge unpleasant realities. Both Mr. Wreszin and Howard have rather miserable lives and do not wish to have even more burdens.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, some female characters from *them* affirm that their husbands withheld information from them: thus, silence is a means to reinforce dominance by having privileged information. As mentioned in the chapter "Mothers," the keeping back of information is a common trait of psychological maltreatment, found in *Gravedigger's*, where Tignor questions his wife Rebecca about her past but does not inform her about present activities or his own past.

In the corpus, silent male characters are often surrounded by people who are willing to listen: Grandpa Vogel had Jesse, who was eager to establish a close rapport with him; and Howard and his father had their talkative and expressive wives. These male characters lived through the Great Depression (1929-1939): Willard, born in 1904, directly experienced it as a young man, and Howard, born around the end of the Depression, suffered its consequences too, because this was an era of great stressors that caused many men to withdraw emotionally and even physically from their families and friends. Children of impoverished families, recalling memories of family life in the 1930s, often described their fathers as emotionally distant and detached toward them ("Impact Family" n. p.).

This predisposition to silence is altered in the late decades of the twentieth century. In *Bird*, for instance, both Edward and Delray openly

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<sup>34</sup> In "Ruth," Mr. Wreszin's philosophy is: "It was better not to ask. [j] Better not to have heard" (*Goddess*, 88-89). So in order to remain uninvolved, he barely talks to anyone, does not ask questions, and does not listen closely. This allows him to pretend he does not know many things that displease him (for instance, he decides to ignore the revelation that the adolescent cousin of his wife makes about having had an abortion; and later on, he even seems convinced that the girl is a virgin). He then uses silence to distort reality and flee from it.

express their feelings to their children. Shortly before dying, Edward honestly tells his daughter about his involvement in the Vietnam War, and how “weird and scared” he felt (*Bird* 226), acknowledging his own vulnerability to his female child, without being afraid that this might change her vision of him as a tough man; whereas Delray often confesses to Aaron how much he misses his late wife. Zeno from *Carthage* also communicates in a positive way, despite not finding it easy. As Cressida comments, “[i]t’s hard for men to talk about—certain things. Daddy had not ever had a son, only daughters. To us, Daddy talks. We listen.” (*Carthage* 19, emphasis in the original). He comes to represent a new generation of men who are more willing to communicate, despite the fact that they still find it problematic. This quotation also reveals a use of speech that the previously mentioned male characters do not often employ; that is, verbal communication as a tool of power. Here, Zeno expresses his power by talking *to* his daughters, not *with* them: he is in a position of power to which the girls submit by listening.

Hence, in *them*, as Creighton argues, Jules and Maureen are “Children of Silence” (the title of the first part of the novel) oppressed by their angry and silent father, Howard, who is unable to expose any degree of self-definition or understanding. He makes a downward trip on the social ladder from a crooked policeman to a factory worker and then, unemployed, falls into a frustrated and angry silence. Jules and Maureen fear and hate him. The weak figure of their father is just one more sign of deprivation in their impoverished rearing (*Joyce* 63). Indeed, Howard’s silence stands for the multiple frustrations of his life that he cannot overcome, mainly related to his breadwinner function: the loss of his position as a policeman and his difficulties finding another job. In this respect, he recalls Willard Harte.

Maureen seems to understand this masculine silence while giving her stepfather Furlong a massage for his sore back: “Maureen stared at his thick, smooth flesh beneath her fingers and understood why he was silent. Her father too had been silent. There was too much flesh to men, too much weight to force words through” (*them* 201). She notices the material and metaphorical weight of men’s bodies; that is, how the demands of hegemonic masculinity place an elevated emphasis on

men's physicality, sometimes to the detriment of their emotional lives. As Donaldson points out, working-class men (like Howard and Furlong) have basically one asset to market: their bodily capacity to labor. In time, their bodies are consumed by the labor they do. In contrast with managers and professionals (like Elwood), by middle age working men's earning capacity is falling, unless they become promoted off the shop floor (qtd. in Connell "Masculinities and Men's" 146). Given this, workingmen may embrace the process that consumes their bodies as their way of enacting their masculine identities (Connell "Masculinities and Men's" 146). The previous quotation explains Elwood's obsession with his high-rank job and his hunger for being promoted, while at the same time clarifies how Howard's body is slowly consumed by his demanding, physical job; until his very life is eventually claimed by it when he dies in a labor accident.

This proves, as Connell remarks, that economic circumstance and organizational structure enter into the configuration of masculinity at the most intimate level. As Mike Donaldson asserts in *Time of Our Lives* (1991), hard labor in factories and mines literally uses up the workers' bodies. This destruction of the body shows the toughness of the work and the worker, and can be perceived as a method of demonstrating masculinity. This does not occur because manual work is necessarily destructive, but because it is done in a destructive manner under economic pressure and management control (Connell *Masculinities* 36).

Jules realizes the tough working conditions his father faces, and his limited abilities to deal with them, as reflected by his unsuccessful attempt to fix a leaking faucet: "That was his father. Never any luck fixing things [...] anger was at the core of him; his soul was anger, made up of anger. Anger for what? For nothing, for himself, for life, for the assembly line" (*them* 137-138). Jules is able to understand how his father has been defeated by his environment; but nevertheless, he is the child who resents Howard the most (to the extent of daydreaming that he kills him even after he has actually died). He is bothered by his silence, which prevents him from knowing what Howard is thinking or feeling. Even when Howard reprimands him, they do not look at each other's faces. This reinforces the boy's perception that his father is not



much interested in his family. Jules feels that his father shuts every door in Jules's mind; as if, with his lack of imagination or hope, he was denying his son the possibilities of a brilliant future of which he constantly dreams.

It is precisely Jules, a male character, the one who disrupts the pattern of silence in the Wendalls since he is a child: "only Jules broke the spell with his cries and complaints and laughter" (*them* 62). This may represent the promise of a future generation of men who are more willing to express how they feel and to use words as a means of asserting their position in the world. Additionally, as Grant notes, Jules realizes the healing power of words from an early age: after he witnesses a plane crash as a child, he stammers, even if he cannot speak, because he senses that to be able to speak about the horror he had seen would help him cope with it (113-114).

Jules's reversal of fatherly silence is a crucial aspect in Oates's subversion of the naturalistic genre: Jules could have succumbed to the unexpressive silent legacy of his father and grandfather, but he overcomes the burden of heredity and becomes a totally different person: he chooses who he wants to be instead of falling victim of his circumstances, as it typically occurs in the naturalistic novels that Oates parodies in *them*. Naturalism proposed that natural law and socio-economic influences are more powerful than the human will, but according to Friedman, Oates differs from this in philosophical grounds: it is not indignation against the forces of heredity that revitalizes her art, since for her, heredity and environment are the irrevocable conditions of our being in the world. On the contrary, Oates's more radical departure from Naturalism is her depiction of will: the destructive power of the will is one of Oates's primary targets (*Joyce* 6). Willard from *Wonderland* is a good example of this: he might have been a victim of the Great Depression; but he is also described as aggressive, dominant and impulsive, so that the tragedy is not simply a consequence of the adversity of his time but of his personality, of the excesses of his destructive will.

Due to their divergent personalities and their lack of a meaningful communication, which prevent the creation of a deep affective bond, Jules does not have much respect for his father: "He couldn't believe

that his father had ever been a cop. What a laugh! How could that fat bastard reach for a gun—how could he get it out on time to use?” (*them* 90). This quotation suggests that Jules would have admired a father who fulfilled better the demands of hegemonic masculinity; that is, who was more physically able and who performed more aptly his breadwinner role. In short, Howard is not a father figure for Jules. At the same time, however, Jules is afraid of Howard to some extent: he is “secretive and polite around his father, fearing his father’s quick temper and his cruelty” (*them* 90). In other words, Jules’s respect for Howard is reduced because he does not fit into the role of the breadwinner according to the demands of the patriarchal ideology; but he also fears his father because he still represents the authority of the Father, sustained by the same ideology to which Jules does not seem to be totally opposed; in fact, he appears to support a patriarchal conception of the role of the father.

After Howard’s death in a horrifying industrial accident, Jules reflects on their relationship:

*I can’t remember his face or anything he said, Jules thought in a panic. It was his father he had to come to grips with. It was not right that a man should live and die and come to nothing, be forgotten, with his own son unable to really remember him [...] So his father had been killed, so it had happened and [...] maybe his father had never really recognized him either, what difference did it make? (*them* 135-136, emphasis in the original)*

Jules is troubled when he realizes that his father was almost a stranger to him. He has always felt deprived of a father figure, but now he is literally an orphan, and feels totally helpless, and unable to come to terms with the bond he had with his late father. This is the reason why, as Johnson points out, years later Jules mistakes his boss Bernard Geffen for a father figure, before realizing he is a deranged criminal (*Understanding* 85). Jules had been moved by Bernard’s immediate trust on him (he hired Jules without barely knowing him), which proves that “Jules wanted to be loved and prized for that, above all—his intelligence” (*them* 229). This shows how starved he is for the fatherly

affection he never enjoyed from Howard. Bernard also affirms that he sees Jules as a son, and even promises to finance a college career for him. But, as it commonly occurs in our corpus (especially in *Wonderland*), father figures are revealed deceitful and dangerous, and their support is illusory or temporal. In this case, we find another common Oatesian trope (recurrently found in *Wonderland* too): the affection-starved son loses his father figure to unexpected violence when Bernard is suddenly murdered. After this, Jules abandons this search for a father and tries to come to terms with the memory of Howard.

Just as Clara and her mother in *Garden*, Jules is able to find some understanding and sympathy for his father's unsuccessful life after he has passed away, but still he cannot feel affection for him: after leaving the family house Jules rarely visits them again, and attributes this to the fact that the house reminds him of his father. Alternatively, his lack of inclination to visit his former home is caused by his wish for autonomy and independence. It is a strategy to distance himself from his father's authority. He also flees from Howard to avoid becoming like him: *them* is a parody of a naturalist novel, and Jules fights against the deterministic heredity of his family, which could force him to reproduce Howard's destiny of frustration and failure. Simultaneously, he escapes from the authority of the Father, of which he has always been afraid.

In conclusion, both Richard and Jules have troubled bonds with their fathers, who despite standing at opposite ends of the socioeconomic ladder, do not represent father figures that their sons admit as models. Richard despises his father not because he is not affectionate toward him, but due to his lack of authority within the family. This proves Richard's adherence to a traditional model of family, and at the same time suggests that a certain authority is needed to develop the parental functions in an effective and appropriate manner. As a result, Richard considers Elwood weak and inferior to his mother, to the extent that he suspects that he is not his actual father; and only tentatively starts to admire and recognize him when he adopts a more authoritative position, but in the end their relationship becomes distant. Jules, too, has conflictive feelings for his father, who is unable to fulfil his traditional role as a provider and tries to compensate this by

means of authority and violence. Jules hates Howard's quiet, moody and violent personality and wishes to escape his aggressive authority; but at the same time, he understands the hardness of his life and the difficulties he finds when trying to measure up as an appropriate breadwinner.

#### 4.3.3.2 The Destruction of the Ideal Family Balance in *We Were the Mulvaney*s

In *Mulvaney*s, the family situation is radically altered after Marianne is raped. The most outstanding change of the parent-child subsystem is a modification of the parenting style: as explained in the chapter "Parents," the Mulvaney parents are at first democratic parents, and later on adopt an authoritarian parenting style. This change is most noticeable in Michael, the father.

At the beginning, Michael is a devoted father who openly discusses matters with his children; but after Marianne's rape and banishment from home, his attitude drastically changes, and he becomes unpredictable and aggressive toward the rest of the family: his legal battle against Zachary Lundt is producing no results; and besides, he is not receiving much support from the community despite having been one of its most prominent and popular figures. His desperation leads him to grow increasingly belligerent and he is even fined for pouring beer over a judge and slamming the rapist against a wall. As the debts of the business and the farm accumulate, he feels bitter and frustrated and starts to pay this with his family. While he used to be extremely kind to Corinne, he becomes cold and rude, and starts to physically abuse her; he is authoritarian and irritable with the children, to the extent that Judd, the youngest son, begins to fear him.

After Michael's transformation, the sons abandon the house at different stages, partly to pursue their independent lives, and partly to escape from their increasingly confrontational and embittered father. The first is Mike, who rents an apartment in town after a final fight with his father. Both his parents are shocked about his decision because they cannot understand why he would wish to leave the idyllic farm: Corinne even wonders "why would one leave paradise willingly" (*Mulvaney*s

179). They do not realize yet, or want to recognize, that their dream-like family life is crumbling.

Patrick also flees from his father when going to college. In fact, he makes it a point of not coming back for holidays when he learns that his sister has not been invited: he is purposefully using distance as a way of accusing his parents of deserting Marianne. Patrick does in fact know that his father cannot deal with the rape, but he cannot forgive him for his choice of expelling Marianne. After he leaves the farm, he does not talk to his father again. Finally, Patrick's revenge on his sister's rapist becomes as a kind of closure of the past, including symbolically erasing his father's harmful influence. This is a reconciliatory experience for him, ironically brought about by violence.

When his sons start to gradually abandon the house, Michael feels betrayed, considering their decisions a challenge to his authority as a father. Possibly, Michael has always had this authoritarian streak, but since he used to have a good relation with his children, it had never been shown before: now, his role as the head of the family and the one who takes decisions is being challenged by his sons, and he reacts badly to this.

Judd also yearns to leave home, as his brothers did; but he is younger, and besides, he wants to look after his mother and protect her from Michael's aggressiveness. Judd both misses and resents his brothers, who have abandoned them. He particularly misses Patrick, to whom he has always been close. Judd's anger toward his father as the ultimate responsible for this situation mounts to such extremes that he fantasizes about shooting him; but, unlike Swan from *Garden*, he refrains from resorting to violence, because he is not inclined toward it. Instead, he confides his feelings to his brother Patrick, thus healthily verbalizing his problems and somehow exorcizing them. At one point, Michael physically attacks Corinne (by shoving or punching her, it is not clear since Judd only hears it), and Judd intervenes to defend his mother. Father and son strike at each other. Following this, Judd also moves out.

As an adult, Judd is more able to understand and sympathize with his father than his resentful adolescent self. Looking back, Judd considers that Michael "was a good man in his heart but stymied,

frenzied, like a creature poked by spears, upright and flailing in a corner. If you got too close, to console, or hope to be consoled, you might be hurt” (*Mulvaneys* 368). We might interpret this as a critique to the demands and prerogatives of patriarchy which concedes uncountable privileges to men but also makes some demands that are not easy to meet: in this case, Michael cannot accept the loss of an authority he had considered rightfully and exclusively his.

The Mulvaneys have become stranded and separated mostly due to Michael’s decisions, but despite his behavior, Michael does not completely destroy the family unit, which is reborn again under the mother’s auspices and reconfigured in a new order. The family is thus gradually getting rid of the rigid power of the father/husband and becoming increasingly democratized, significantly, under the guidance of the mother: she is the one who organizes a family reunion that brings all the family together again, along with its new members, that is, the partners and children of Marianne, Mike, and Patrick.

#### 4.3.3.3 Conclusion to Father and Son Subsystem

In *them* and *Mulvaneys*, facing situations of violence and lack of emotional bonding, the sons yearn to escape their dominant fathers. In *them*, Jules leaves the oppressive environment created by a ruthless and silent father in order to avoid becoming like him; in *Mulvaneys*, the sons flee from their father’s mounting violence.

More specifically, Jules has extremely conflictive feelings for Howard. On the one hand, he resents his father’s emotional detachment and searches for a positive father figure after Howard dies, but is unable to find it. On the other hand, he feels a certain contempt for him due to his inability to exert his role as the family’s provider, but he is also able to sympathize with all the difficulties that his father has to face. Finally, he hates his aggressiveness, while at the same time fearing his position as the Father.

Judd resents his father’s transformation and his new aggressiveness, but as an adult he is able to understand more sympathetically the limitations that he faced due to his adherence to the rigid patriarchal father-role. Thus, in both *them* and *Mulvaneys*, the sons alternatively despise and are sympathetic of their parents. Moreover,

the new generation of sons, represented by Jules and Judd, generally exhibits new tendencies that separate them from their fathers. Namely, these sons are less aggressive, self-centered or self-destructive than their fathers. The sons abruptly break the constrictive bonds that tied them to old patriarchal habits and escape their fathers' influence in order to avoid following their model. This hints at a transformation of the nuclear family prerogatives.

In contrast, in *Expensive*, Richard's relationship with his father, who is the epitome of the perfect good-provider, is awkward and emotionally distant. Elwood does not really treat Richard as his child but acts both as a non-custodial father and as a kind of comrade. Richard, who adheres to the traditional conception of the nuclear family, dreams of having a more authoritarian father, but when Elwood assumes this position, it is too late to recover or reconstruct their bond. At the end, the only father and son's link is the assignation that Elwood gives to Richard, proving that he has definitely settled upon the role of the provider and forsaken any emotional ties to his son.

It is interesting to perceive that in Oates's first novels, as critics like Daly have observed, the sons die sacrificed to their fathers (17). This is especially noticeable in *Garden*, where Swan's suicide is derived from his conflicts with his three parents (especially his mother), and it is also a rejection of his stepfather's gender impositions upon him. In *Expensive*, Richard's intention of committing suicide is mostly linked to his troubled bond to his mother, but the detachment with his father may conceivably have some influence upon it. However, in *Shuddering*, where accident plays a crucial role, Shar's suicide is described as a way to take control of his chaotic and unplanned life.

The tendency to have the sons die starts to disappear with the novel *them*. Interestingly, from this novel on, the fathers are the ones to be destroyed, which suggests a symbolic changing pattern in family relations: the power of the father is definitely waning. In *them*, Howard perishes to the random violence of his physically-demanding job, while Furlong goes to jail after assaulting Maureen. In *Wonderland* and *Gravedigger's*, the fathers commit suicide after unsuccessfully trying to destroy their whole families (there are survivors from their attacks) in what could be considered as the last moribund efforts of

unchallenged patriarchal dominance; in *Do with Me*, the father literally disappears; in *Son* and *A Bloodsmoor Romance*,<sup>35</sup> respectively, the grandfather (who takes the role of a custodial father) and father suddenly die; *Angel* and *Marya*'s plots are opened after the fathers have passed away; in *Bird* and *Lived* the fathers are murdered; etc.

This change is clearly perceived in the corpus in *Mulvaney's*, which perfectly illustrates the gradual disappearance of the old traditional figures of the nuclear family, which is not destroyed by Michael's death, but simply reconfigured under the new guidance of the mother, much more democratic than his inflexible rule, allowing multiple configurations: now, Corinne does not live with a man but with a female friend.

The destructive inclinations of these fathers against their families seem to turn against them. The implication at work here is that the sons do no longer die for challenging the patriarchal authority of their fathers: they succeed in their rebellion for liberty and for new, more flexible, modes of living as men. Then sons become able to equate, or surpass, their will to that of their fathers, suggesting that the nuclear family which gave monologic power to the father/husband is starting to fade away.

Moreover, the sons' private desertions are usually equated to public history, as in *Mulvaney's*, where, as Judd recalls: "One by one, we went away. It's the story of American farms and small towns in the latter half of the twentieth century: we went away" (*Mulvaney's* 189). Once more, Oates compares private history to public history: the Mulvaney farm stands as a symbol of rural depopulation and move to urban centers; as well as of the waning omnipotent power of the father figures within the family. In time, it is possible that the children of these new generations, not wishing to replicate their father's violent domination, would have been more nurturing and understanding fathers themselves.

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<sup>35</sup> Hereafter cited in text as *Bloodsmoor*.



## 5 CHILDREN

The family is the first social group to which the child belongs and the place where, as Hutter highlights, intimate and enduring relationships are formed (“Multicultural” 5). As a consequence, the family is the place where the journey to subjective awareness begins, as Wykes and Welsh assert (98). In fact, Peden and Glahe refer to the family as the “matrix of individuality;” the place where one’s being is rooted in (4).

Ríos González describes the relevance of family influence in the following terms:

El ser humano necesita un núcleo de relación en el que la dinámica de tensiones y gratificaciones faciliten la madurez, el progreso y la cohesión de la personalidad. Y tal contexto necesita ternura, seguridad y apoyo como elementos antropológicamente necesarios para estructurar la personalidad. La familia [...] será el terreno en el que se intercambiará información en todos los niveles, se proporcionarán energías estimulantes de cambios y progresos según las etapas evolutivas del sujeto. (68-69)

Although there are references to young children in the corpus, they are scarce in comparison to the prominence of teenagers and adolescents. For this reason, this chapter focuses on adolescence not only due to its relevance as a developmental stage for the creation of the self but also due to Oates’s stated interest in teenager characters: “I connect so much to the young person” (qtd. in “New Monroe” 219). Indeed, she describes adolescents as “restless, vulnerable, passionate, hungry to learn, skeptical and naïve by turns; with an unquestioned faith in the power to change, if not life, one’s comprehension of life” (Oates *Where I’ve Been* 65). This is possibly the reason why, in novels like *Wonderland*, she had some mesmeric momentums writing about “a young person evolving and having spiritual and intellectual and

emotional discoveries” (Oates qtd. in “New Monroe” 219). Oates has also asserted to feel especially close to adolescent girls (“Written Interviews” 563).

As Lanz argues, adolescence is considered a joint developmental enterprise between parents and their children which involves all family members and is characterized by transformation and continuity (133, 135, 139). In fact, the word “adolescence” comes from a Latin root meaning “to grow up” (Berman 10).

## 5.1 ADOLESCENCE

### 5.1.1 Historical Perspective

The current concept of adolescence as a liminal period between childhood and adulthood did not always exist. As Scabini points out, in primitive societies the change from childhood into adulthood had an abrupt nature: it was a ritualized process featuring rites of passage that marked the irreversible beginning of adulthood. In a more recent past, the transition was clearly marked by events that took place in a defined order: finishing school, entering the labor market, and/or getting married (4). This is reflected in the divergent lives of female teenagers from *Garden* and *Carthage*. In *Garden*, several of Clara’s female friends, such as Caroline and Ginny, marry young and have children soon. Clara also starts supporting herself while she is a teenager. So, basically, Clara and her friends make an abrupt leap from children to adults. In *Carthage*, nonetheless, Cressida has not completely entered the adult realm at nineteen years old, since she still has clear adolescent traits. Besides, the time span applied to these activities varied depending on one’s gender: for example, women’s range for getting married was much more restricted than that of men (Scabini 4).

Thus, Scabini continues, the order of the markers of adulthood has been altered nowadays, because modern life cycles allow more experimentation over them: consequently, it is common to choose when to make these transitions. As a consequence of the prolongation of the transition to adulthood, the Family System of Origin extends its influence for a longer period of time; in contrast with the past, when it only exerted a minor role (4). This difference is clearly detected by comparing *Garden* to *Mulvaneys*. In the former, although Clara alters

the traditional order of these markers by having a child and then getting married; after leaving her home at an early age, she never regains contact with her Family System of Origin again. In *Mulvaney's*, however, the children leave the family house, find a job and decide whether to get married or not at a much later age than Clara, most of them after their adolescence. For them, the Family System of Origin continues to be a great influence through their lives.

In the United States, the appearance of the concept of adolescence can be specifically located in the Great Depression. As stated in the article "Impact of the Great Depression on Children and Adolescents," the Depression led families to have fewer children, but curiously, even if children were a smaller proportion of the nation's total population, they began to stand more visibly in American public policy. (n. p.).

Childhood also acquired a new dimension, promoted by radio shows which appealed to young consumers, as well as films featuring child stars such as Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, and Shirley Temple, which portrayed an idealized childhood freed from adult responsibilities and filled with activities experienced with peers instead of adults. Although the economic crisis hindered the development of a commercialized youth culture since many children and adolescents suffered severe deprivations, its promotion was at the same time granted by the increasing enrollment numbers in high schools, which started to become a universal experience. The quality of schools was extremely varied, but generally, communities accepted the notion that education through high school was a public responsibility, and so by the late 1930s a majority of seventeen-year-old adolescents attended high school for the first time in America's history. The idea of adolescence started to emerge in this context. Indeed, the word "teenager" was introduced into the American printed vocabulary by an article in *Popular Science* from 1941 ("Impact Children" n. p.).

The origin of the concept of adolescence in the Great Depression was thus closely linked to capitalism and consumerism. In fact, in the short story "Free" from *Goddess*, Oates equates "teenagers" to "consumers" (*Goddess* 126). The corpus accurately depicts the new dimension that childhood acquired during the twentieth century, as well as the emergence of adolescence, which can be noticed in the

differences between Clara and her son Swan in *Garden*; the most significant being the great educational leap between their generations. This difference is not only caused by the divergent conception of childhood and adolescence that their generations have, but it is also caused by the different social classes that they belong to as teenagers. In any case, Swan is the first Walpole (as far as the reader knows) to attend high school and have a more “conventional” adolescence as part of the new youth culture.

Nowadays, then, there is not an abrupt jump from childhood into adulthood. Instead, the process of adolescence has emerged as one that comprises several microtransitions, and a new developmental phase called young adulthood has been added at the end. Therefore, we distinguish early adolescence (eleven to fourteen years old), middle adolescence (fifteen to sixteen years old), late adolescence (seventeen to nineteen years old) and young adulthood (twenty to twenty-six years old). During young adulthood, relationships are realigned: it is not a phase of great changes but of adjustment to previous modifications (Lanz 133, 135, 139). Scabini argues that the span of the period of young adulthood has been increasing in the last decades in Europe. Moreover, nowadays, adolescents are given more capacity of negotiation at home as well as decision making in comparison with previous times (3-4).

The corpus proves that adolescence has indeed extended its limits during the last decades. In *Garden*, Clara takes care of her younger siblings, works since she is a child and goes on to live alone when she is just fourteen years old. She does not enjoy a formal education like Swan: she is suddenly forced to become an adult who takes care of herself. On the other hand, in *Carthage*, Cressida is under her parents’ protection until she is nineteen years old, not only economically but also emotionally. Besides, she is still facing her identity crisis at that age, while trying to find a place in society.

### **5.1.2 Developmental Processes**

Adolescence is a period of enormous transitions that may be divided into three main interwoven developmental processes; namely, biological, cognitive and socioemotional processes. The biological

processes involve the physical changes in an individual's body; such as the development of the brain, height and weight gains, motor skills, and hormonal changes. The cognitive processes involve the transformations in an individual's thinking and intelligence; like memorizing a poem, solving a math problem, or imagining what it would be like to be a different person. The socioemotional processes involve changes in the individual's relationships with other people, in emotions, in personality and in the role of social contexts of development, such as taking back to parents, an aggression to a peer, the development of assertiveness, society's gender-role orientation, etc. (Santrock 16).

First, the biological processes of adolescence are experienced with the onset of puberty (the marker of entry for adolescence). This is a period of rapid physical maturation involving hormonal and bodily changes that occur primarily during early adolescence. There are a set of psychological changes associated with pubertal development: not only adolescents think of themselves differently, but their parents and peers also act differently toward them (Santrock 80, 87).

According to Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke, this process involves the changes of puberty, by which adolescents are faced with sexually mature bodies. They feel that they are different from their own perceptions, with which they were familiar; and now they need to integrate the physically mature body into their self representation (39, 41).

The corpus clearly reflects how adolescents face these changes with diverse attitudes. For instance, Marianne Mulvaney is terrified when she has her first period, and she does not feel comfortable discussing it with anyone: "Her body was her own, private self. Only Corinne might be informed certain things but not even Corinne, not even Mom, always" (*Mulvaney's* 72). In *Bird*, Krista has similar responses to her period: "a phenomenon that filled me with a commingled rage and pride, and anxiety that others—like my mother—would know what my body was doing, what red-earthen-colored seepage it was emitting through a thigh hole between my legs" (*Bird* 11). Both girls have some difficulties adjusting to their body changes. This is a common reaction: as Oates comments, girls are often led to feel shame about their periods. This shame is described as "being in a

sense built into the female: biological rather than conditioned. But of course it is exaggerated by conditioning” (qtd. in Johnson *Invisible* 56). Indeed, women are often led to feel embarrassed about their own bodies and sexualities.

Marianne’s brother Patrick also has feelings of shame about bodily changes at this stage:

In that phase of his early adolescence in which the merest whisper of a forbidden word, a caress of feathers, a sudden sweet-perfumy scent, the sound of fabric against fabric, silky, suggestive—the mere thought of a girl’s armpit! nostril! the moist red cut between the legs!—would arouse Patrick sexually, to the point of pain. He’d hidden away in disgust, in shame. (*Mulvaney*s 40)

Patrick will get control over these emotions and he grows up to become a more confident boy.

These episodes prove that, as Santrock remarks, body image is crucial for teenagers. For some adolescents, the transitions of puberty are stormy, but not for most. There are gender differences in their perception: in general, girls have a less positive body image than boys. Menarche (first menstruation) has been described as a “main event” in most historical accounts of adolescence. In a study by Brooks-Gunn and Ruble in 1982, most responses to it were positive. The range of reactions to menarche in the study was varied, but it was mostly described mildly: as a little upsetting, a little surprising, or a little exciting and positive, as illustrated by Krista’s reaction. Menarche may be disruptive, especially for unprepared and early-maturing girls, but it does not usually reach the tumultuous and conflicting proportions described by early theoreticians (Santrock 87-89).

These three teenagers from the corpus are all expressing feelings of anxiety toward the transformations of their bodies. Anxiety is a common occurrence in this period. Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke remark that twice as many girls as boys want to change their appearance. Adolescents use relationships, autoerotic activities, fantasies and various forms of trial to establish their body image, which includes the sexually mature genitals and the recognition and

integration of the genitals of the opposite sex (39, 41). This recognition and integration are precisely what Patrick is struggling with in the previous quotation.

Second, adolescents are trying to build their personalities, and they often turn to models in order to provide them with desirable traits or patterns of behavior. At times, teenagers select members of their own families as models, whom they might either value and imitate, or reject. This shall be extensively discussed in the case of *Carthage* and *Wonderland*, but it is also present in other novels from the corpus, namely, *Expensive* and *Bird*. In *Expensive*, Richard develops ideal schemes of how parents should be and compares his parents to them. Richard feels enormously disappointed with his parents' failure to meet his standards and concludes that he is not paid enough attention to at home, and more specifically, by his mother. This moves him to construct an elaborate fantasy of being his mother's killer in order to regain the central position in her life that he has been deprived of. At the age of thirteen years old, Krista from *Bird* starts to assess how her stranded father really is, and despite continuously noticing the multiple episodes of slight neglect and several disappointments that he brings to her, she constructs an idealized image of him that lasts in her mind for years.

These are the so-called cognitive processes, analyzed in the light of the ideas of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who explores how adolescents articulate their conscious thoughts. According to him, not all the information the adolescents pour into their minds comes from their environment: Piaget argued that adolescents construct their own cognitive worlds by adapting their thinking to include new ideas because additional information furthers understanding. He distinguished four age-related main stages to understand the world: the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. The sensorimotor stage extends from birth to around two years of age. In it, children construct their understanding of the world by coordinating sensory experiences (like seeing and hearing) with physical, motoric actions. They also start to operate with primitive symbols by the end of the stage. During the preoperational stage, which occurs from two to seven years old,

approximately, children start to represent the world with words, images and drawings. Children can then symbolically represent the world but are still unable to perform operations. Operations is the Piagetian term for internalized mental actions that allow children to do mentally what they previously did physically. The concrete operational stage takes place from around seven to eleven years old. In this phase, children can perform operations, and logical reasoning replaces intuitive thought as long as reasoning can be applied to specific and concrete examples. In other words, the child can reason logically about concrete events. Finally, the formal operational stage emerges between eleven and fifteen years old. During it, children move beyond concrete experiences and think in more abstract and logical ways. This is the case of Richard, who is precisely eleven years old and develops his capacity to think in abstract terms to the fullest by imagining his mother's intimate life. As part of thinking more abstractly, they develop ideas of ideal circumstances and for instance think about how an ideal parent should be and compare their actual parents with these ideals. As mentioned, Richard is a perfect example of this idealization. Adolescents also begin to entertain ideas for the future. Another indicator of the abstract quality of adolescents' thinking at this stage is their increased tendency to think about themselves; and to compare themselves to others in regard to their ideals and desired qualities (Santrock 43-44, 102). In *them*, we perceive how adolescents start to value their own selves and the possibilities for the future. As we shall see, Jules shows an enormous capacity to imagine different roles and numerous options for the future, while his sister Maureen can only imagine a closed and constrained set of possibilities.

Piaget has made invaluable contributions to this field, but he has been criticized, too. It has been argued that some cognitive experiences emerge earlier than he thought; while others may emerge later. Besides, it has been disputed that various aspects of a stage emerge in synchronicity, as Piaget claimed. Finally, culture and education have a stronger influence than Piaget envisioned, as the cognitive development theories of the Russian Lev Vygotsky show (Santrock 109-110). Since our discussion revolves around teenagers, we shall focus on the last stage of Piaget's cognitive theories, the formal operational stage. This



phase may start at such an early age as eleven years old, that is, the beginning of early adolescence.

Finally, the socioemotional processes are related to the relationship that the adolescent develops with others and with himself. One outstanding aspect of how adolescents perceive themselves is their heightened self-consciousness, which is reflected in their belief that others are as interested in them as they themselves are, and in their sense of personal uniqueness. David Elkind dissects adolescent egocentrism into two types of social thinking; imaginary audience and personal fable. The imaginary audience involves attention-getting behavior, or the desire to be noticed, visible, “on stage.” This is a common occurrence in early adolescents, who think that they are the main actors and all the others are the audience. The personal fable is related to the adolescents’ sense of uniqueness, which makes them think that nobody can understand how they feel. Some teenagers may craft stories about the self that are full of fantasy, in order to retain their sense of uniqueness (qtd. in Santrock 134). We clearly see this in Richard from *Expensive*, who tries to make himself the protagonist of his mother’s life story by fantasizing about being her killer.

When considering the socioemotional processes, we need to pay attention to the reciprocal nature of the socialization of parents and children; that is, both parts have an influence over the other, instead of simply the adolescents being affected by their parents (Santrock 146). This is exemplified in a scene from *Mulvaney’s* that shows how difficult it is for teenagers to face and address their parents’ feelings now that they can understand them better, as seen when Patrick discovers his mother crying: “No embarrassment so keen, so cringing-painful, as that endured by an adolescent in the presence of his parents” (*Mulvaney’s* 164). This quote also shows the painful realization that the parents are not the demiurgic entities in total control of events and emotions that young children had imagined, but that parents have fears and vulnerabilities, just as adolescents do.

One of the most interesting aspects of the socioemotional process is the different approach to the relations with parents in the light of the adolescent’s capacity for more abstract reasoning and higher emotional command. In fact, parents display emotions to their adolescent

daughters and sons that they might have hidden were they small children.

### 5.1.3 Liminal State

All these three processes are complicated, as White and Woollett argue, by the pressure that adolescents receive to move into the adult world and to separate themselves physically and emotionally from their parents (95). These pressures are extensively discussed in *Bird*, where Krista finds many complications in gaining autonomy from her family circle; particularly, given her reluctance to gaining some independence from her father. Krista describes herself as one of those people who are “forever daughters, at any age” (*Bird* 3).

There is a significant incident at the beginning of the novel to which Krista tries to attach little importance, but which seems crucial for her, since it is one of the first episodes that she narrates in her memoir. During one of her clandestine encounters with her father, he drives her home and promises to wait until she has entered the house, but instead drives away. Krista tries to remember her reaction at the time: “I wasn’t that kind of daughter. I think that I wasn’t. Clinging to a man’s careless promise *Won’t drive away until you’re safely indoors, Puss*” (*Bird* 54, emphasis in the original). She subsequently justifies her father’s behavior: “I would not wish to recall so trivial, so petty an injury, a misunderstanding, a moment’s carelessness on the part of a man with so much else to occupy his mind” (*Bird* 7). It is impossible to know whether Krista was actually hurt at the time, but in any case, she never forgets the episode, which may be interpreted as symbolic of her father’s treatment of her: he loved her but did not take her feelings too seriously because he was always inclined to think of her as a little girl. The latter tendency is reflected in his calling her “Puss.”

In other episodes, however, Krista resents being considered a child. For instance, when Edward forces her to say hello to his friends, she feels “like a three-year-old on display” (*Bird* 89). Despite generally enjoying the puerile treatment, the adolescent Krista also wants to be considered a grown-up girl.

Thus, the pressure exerted upon teenagers commonly takes the form of opposing pulls toward childhood and adulthood exerted by both

children and parents. Adolescents alternatively behave maturely or childishly; while parents either treat their teenage daughters and sons as if they were little children, or either demand from them a more mature behavior. This is caused by the most salient trait of adolescence: its liminal nature, that is, its status as an intermediate a stage between childhood and adulthood. At times, then, the teenager behaves like a child, while some other times she/he acts like an adult, a fluctuation which may cause confusion to others, but also to herself/himself.

For instance, in *Garden*, at thirteen years old, Clara and her friend Rosalie get a ride to town from a stranger who tries to take them to his house. Clara's refusal, firm and hostile, is nonetheless intertwined with a slightly flirtatious tone. Later on, Clara reflects about her reaction: "Something strange seemed to be happening but Clara did not know what it was. She seemed to be doing something, keeping something going. [...] Then she forgot what she was doing [...] She was a child again" (*Garden* 65). Clara has unconsciously replicated the reaction that an older person would have had; but as she is in a transitional stage, she is not used to such behavior.

This episode implies the opening of a new world for Clara, previously unknown to her. This change is reinforced by the two friends' destination that day: the city, where they visit a shopping mall. There, Clara is ashamed about her awkwardness when buying and her little money. This is one of her first contacts with the urban capitalist world of consumerism to which she will soon crave access, and whose rules and conventions she would dominate years later, as a married woman.

The pressures to enter into the adult world are related to questions of autonomy. In Santrock's definition, autonomy during adolescence encompasses several dimensions which include parental attitudes, culture, demographic factors, etc. One of the most relevant forms of this autonomy is emotional autonomy; that is, the capacity to relinquish childlike emotional dependencies on parents. While developing emotional autonomy, adolescents increasingly de-idealize parents, perceive them as people rather than parental figures and become less dependent on them for immediate emotional support (Santrock 159-160). In *Bird*, for instance, we witness how Krista is eventually able to

de-idealize her father and start to perceive him more as a man than as her perfect so-called “daddy.”

At times, the acquisition of this autonomy and the need for separation are more easily accepted by adolescents than by parents, since teenagers yearn to acquire their own space and make their individual choices, as seen in *Mulvaney's*. When an adolescent Judd thinks: “*I want my own life. I'm not just Mulvaney, I'm Judd*” (*Mulvaney's* 355, emphasis in the original), he is highlighting the fact that, despite belonging to his family, he has his own individual identity as a separate person.

White and Woollett specify that children's entry into the world beyond the family is accelerated during adolescence, since teenagers have considerable freedom to make day to day decisions, such as what clothes to wear or how to spend their free time, as well as more transcendental choices about education, work, and political beliefs. Besides, adolescents can take responsibility for themselves (95). For example, as a teenager, Clara's son Swan starts to express his dislike for some of his family's habits, like going hunting and eating meat. His attitude is not influenced by anyone in the family: it stems from his own inner reflection; and is mostly met with surprise and opposition from his parents.

Similarly, the teenager Marianne Mulvaney makes the transcendental choice of not accusing her rapist, against the opinion of her father. She makes this decision and does not change her mind despite the pressure she receives to press charges. This may be considered a sign of maturity and responsibility: she adheres to her choice despite the pain that it eventually brings to her, since her father will never forgive her for this refusal.

The entry into adulthood, then, takes different forms in the corpus depending on the historical context. For instance, it is much more abrupt in *Garden*, where Clara has a son and marries while she is young; than in *Carthage*, where the protagonist undergoes a much slower transition to maturity.

#### 5.1.4 Family's Adjustment

Families differ in the way in which they adjust to their adolescent members. Savin-Williams and Small have described the factors that influence this process, such as the parents' beliefs about the course of development and their willingness to accept young people's independence. Moreover, parents and adolescents have contradictory ideas and expectations: parents' expectations for young people are not static, and so parents' treatment swings between demands for obedience and allowing young people to make their own decisions (qtd. in White and Woollett 97-98). This latter trend may be equated to their alternatively treatment of adolescents as children or as adults.

In *them*, Loretta is quite aware of the changes that adolescence will bring to her children and seems quite willing to accept them. The problem is that she allows her preconceptions about adolescence to dominate her perspective about her children; and thus, she does not perceive or understand their true needs. For instance, knowing the importance of appearance for teenagers, she buys a lipstick for her daughter Maureen, but in general she is emotionally unresponsive, which deeply hurts Maureen. Loretta cannot see her real daughter and her necessities: she likes the lipstick but would have preferred to feel some affection from her mother.

In *Mulvaney's*, Corinne also realizes how adolescence alters her children's lives, and tries to get used to it:

As for Mickey-junior, her firstborn—she's had to give him up, in the emotional, intimate sense, years ago. He even winced now if she called him "Mickey-Junior" and not "Mike." Not just that he'd begun to shrug away embarrassed at his mother's touch but—clearly—he'd begun what Corinne understood was a secret sexual life, a sexual intense life, with how many girls Corinne would have grown sick and silly by this time trying to count. Not that Corinne was a jealous mother. Not in *that way*. Like certain of her women friends. Confessing how obsessed they were with their son's probable secret lives. (*Mulvaney's* 165, emphasis in the original)

Corinne is sensitive to her son's need for independence, as acknowledged by the fact that she recognizes his right to have his own intimate life; however, she is saddened to have lost the easy intimacy she had with him when he was a child. Other instances of the adjustment of parents to adolescence are more conflictive: we have already analyzed some of the fathers' reactions to their daughters' sexual initiation in the chapter "Fathers."

Parent-adolescent relationships involve a movement toward adulthood and separation as well as pulls to remain connected to family members. At this stage, there is considerable negotiation between parents and teenagers: the latter wish to separate their opinions from those of their parents, while at the same time justifying their views to them (Lanz 134). Krista tries to make her mother understand why she cannot suddenly break up the relationship with her father; but Lucille is not very sympathetic to her, despite her good intentions of protecting her daughter from a man she suspects of being violent. When the communication between mother and daughter has proved ineffective (since neither of them could effectively convey their perspective to the other), Krista makes her own choices: she disobeys her mother and meets her father in secret.

Ideally, Lanz asserts, parents should allow adolescents the freedom to separate themselves, while at the same time communicating and reinforcing their own values. This whole process of individualization takes place by means of communication (134). And so, relations with parents become reciprocal during adolescence, when adolescents continue to defer to their parents' knowledge but they also feel that they can contribute to family decisions (White and Woollett add 95). In *Carthage*, the parents allow their daughters their own privacy as well as the liberty to choose what they want, or to withhold information from them if they wish. They do not feel that they have the right to demand explanations over their personal lives, which proves they are treating them as adults instead of children.

Lanz concludes that late adolescents and young adults have more communication problems with their parents than early or middle adolescents (136). This may be due to the greater yearn for independence that people have at these stages. Cressida is again a good

example of a late adolescent who has difficulties establishing a fluent communication with her parents, even though they are understanding and non-intrusive.

In this process, congruence, or the result of the renegotiation process through which children and parents build a new balance during adolescence, is a crucial factor. Parents and adolescents have opposite perceptions both of their relationship and of the family environment, but this might be considered a symbol of the distance that the adolescent must handle in order to individuate from the family. This lack of congruence would then be necessary to cope with the new needs and highlight the individuality of the family members. Sometimes, though, the disagreement is so great that adolescents are not able to come back to be “accepted” by parents (Lanz 133, 139). For instance, Dr. Pedersen cannot forgive Jesse for helping his wife to leave him. He cannot tolerate an action that he interprets as a challenge to his will, and hence declares Jesse dead for him.

Some parents are slow to change and resist the new person, while others enjoy the changes in the relationship, respect the adolescents’ competence and like to share adult interests with her/him. Others find their children’s maturity and independence threatening, partly because of what it indicates about their own age and position in the family. Parents who are worried about their own problems or are going through divorce may be less sensitive to the adolescent’s changes (White and Woollett 97-98). In those cases in which parents are not a reliable presence in the lives of their children, the children’s emotional and social development is affected (Travis 39). Apart from Edward and Krista in *Bird*, the best example of the unwillingness to accept the irruption of adolescence is seen in Dr. Pedersen from *Wonderland*, who treats his daughter Hilda as a little child, in a highly condescending manner. Moreover, all the parents from *Bird* are so absorbed by their own problems that they do not pay much attention to their children’s needs, the best example being found in Delray neglecting both the household tasks and his child, and in Edward endangering his daughter by abducting her.

Conflicts with parents are frequent. The potential for retaliation is increased in adolescence: teenagers demand explanations from parents

and can argue effectively with them. For instance, Patrick Mulvaney demands that his mother tells him about his father's behavior following Marianne's rape: "What's *wrong* with Dad? I've got a right to know" (*Mulvaney* 182, emphasis in the original).

The way in which conflict is managed varies considerably. Some parental styles promote a close relation with the children while others may escalate in tension. Parents who have an authoritarian style may succeed in containing conflict as long as young people accept their authority; while more democratic parents, who discuss things with children, may find this strategy useful as well when the children become adolescents. However, adolescents' conflicts with their parents do not tend to undermine family functioning because they are related to superficial aspects of the relationship rather than basic values and attitudes (White and Woollett 96-97). In *Mulvaney*, there are examples of both responses, one based on tenderness and the other one imbued with tension: before Marianne's rape, the parents are close to their children and willing to negotiate matters with them. However, as their relationships become more complicated, the old approaching strategies fail.

Despite this, White and Woollett conclude (95), parents continue to be a major influence as sources of information, attachment and affection, and young people generally have positive feelings about their families. In *them*, Jules goes away from home, and although at the beginning he does not visit them too much, he will keep considering the relationship to them as one of the major ones in his life.

### **5.1.5 Running Away from Home**

The trope of characters, especially girls, running away from their families is commonly found in Oates. This flight, and the usual subsequent return home, represents a clear instance of the rhythm of withdrawal and return that Martin et al. describe, as we shall soon explain. Cologne-Brookes describes this process as consisting of the following stages: home, rebellion, escape, homesickness, and attempted or actual reconciliation. This pattern has a strong effect over identity (qtd. in Oates "Written Interviews" 554). When the reconciliation is



consummated and the girls return home, they are experiencing a cycle of withdrawal and return that will shape their selves forever.

Apart from being a central theme in *Wonderland* (along with “How,” “Girl at the Edge,” and *Ontological*), in the corpus, the most notorious runaways are Clara from *Garden*, Loretta and Nadine from *them*, and Cressida from *Carthage*. Running away is also present in Oates’s first novel *Shuddering* with Karen, and in the short story “Les Beaux Jours”<sup>36</sup> from the collection *Beautiful Days* (2018), featured by an unnamed girl. The fact that the runaways are female characters indicates a greater pattern of oppression or discomfort at home than in the case of male characters, who would seem to enjoy much more freedom. The reasons for their escape are generally based on a rebellion against family constraints or family dissatisfaction, which generates an unbearable tension, or on role conflict within families that leave little space for children to be not only daughters or sons but also grow to become independent young women or men. The protagonists from “Beaux” and “How,” Tessa from “Girl at the Edge” and Nadine from *them* run away from their gilded cages and inane and wealthy lives in the suburbs of Detroit; while Clara, Loretta, Karen, Shelley from *Wonderland* and Shelley from *Ontological* flee from their father’s oppression or violence.

Nadine and Karen are the only characters who perfectly follow Cologne-Brookes pattern of home, rebellion, escape, homesickness, and attempted or actual reconciliation; although their homesickness and reconciliation could be based on merely practical reasons: Nadine begs her parents to take her home after she finds herself alone in Texas; and Karen chooses to return home when her lover, with whom she had run away, dies. According to Friedman, in *Shuddering*, initiation is a

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<sup>36</sup> Hereafter cited in text as “Beaux.” This short story presents a Gothic atmosphere like that of Oates’s postmodernist romance saga, in which the eleven-year-old protagonist runs away from her wealthy house in New York City. The story hints at an incestuous interest of the father for the daughters, which is similar (but subtler) to that in *Wonderland*. The girl enters into another dimension by means of a canvas from a museum, where she becomes a prisoner of a painter and is forced to model for him, starved, and sexually abused. The cruelty of this man and the terrible nature of his chalet recall the “Bog Kingdom” from *The Accursed*, where Annabel Slade is imprisoned after being abducted by her demonic husband, enduring a period of slavery, abuse and deprivations along with some other girls. Both episodes seem to convey, in Gothic terms, the violence endured by some women at the hands of their lovers or husbands.

process of painful enlightenment that terminates in resignation and reconciliation (*Joyce* 22). Indeed, Karen comes back home and recomposes the broken relationship with her father; while in “Beaux,” the girl dreams of escaping slavery and being forgiven and admitted back home.

Instead, the girl from “How” and Shelley from *Wonderland* face the homesickness phase much more ambiguously. Despite possibly missing some aspects of their home (e. g., Shelley writes to Jesse), neither of them really decides to come back and reconcile: they are forced to return home against their will by figures of authority like their fathers or the police. The effects of this vary. On the one hand, in “How,” the girl seems more inclined to return, assimilate her flight and reconcile with her parents. On the other hand, in *Wonderland*, Shelley only has the possibility of returning home in the revised edition, where she survives, but in none of the versions of *Wonderland* do we witness a complete reconciliation.

Additionally, in *Garden* and *them*, Clara and Loretta run away from violence and they do not return home in part because they start their Self-Created Family System at a young age. But they both miss their homes, and think of their parents, so that homesickness is clearly present in both cases. Loretta can be said to partly reconcile with her lost family when years later she forgives her brother Brock for killing her lover; but Clara never has the opportunity to do so. In *Carthage*, Cressida can also be considered to be running away from home: she undergoes all the phases that Cologne-Brookes mentions, and reconciles with her family upon her come back, with the exception of her sister Juliet who does not really forgive her.

As a result, we find a full circle of withdrawal and return in the cases of the protagonist from “How,” Tessa, Nadine, Loretta, Cressida and Karen; because in some way or another they are reconciled with their families. In contrast, in the case of Shelley from *Wonderland* and the protagonist from “Beaux,” there is only a pattern of separation, with the difference that the latter girl would wish to reconcile and Shelley would not.

In these instances, the young women literally escape from home, but the running away might also be metaphorical. As Cologne-Brookes

adds, Oates's novel *Missing* is a meditation on grief and guilt which presents the same pattern of escape and rejection, return and reconciliation (qtd. in Oates "Written Interviews" 557). The novel describes how the protagonist, Nikki Eaton, reevaluates the figure of her late mother and becomes closer to her than she was during her life.

Daly explains the complexities of running away by quoting Gayle Green: the desire to leave home, whether literal or figurative, is a strong characteristic of woman's fiction in the 1960s. In Green's words, "Leaving home is not enough. Change requires more than moving out, resolution or will: it requires a process of re-envisioning which allows an evolution and alteration of desire and consciousness" (qtd. in Daly 3). This re-envisioning is not found in Nadine, for example, who after returning home continues to be the same disconnected girl she used to be; but is obviously present in the protagonist from "How," who starts to see herself in a different light.

This powerful desire to leave, Daly continues, is often in conflict with the equally powerful desire to stay, to remain where one is known, however oppressive this home might be. As a result, Oates's characters are often defeated in their efforts to leave, just as they are defeated in their efforts to author themselves (4). Curiously, these adolescents blatantly acquiesce to traditional gender roles, illustrating Robert H. Fossum's thesis that "Oates's people crave an order associated with 'home' and the loving protection of the father. Repeatedly, this conflicts with the yearning for the 'road' and freedom from the father" (qtd. in Daly 5). Fossum refers here to male characters, but Daly accurately incorporates female characters into his theory (5). Although, on the one hand, the male characters in the corpus are more inclined to fixation than to mobility, there are also a few exceptions, like Jules, who leaves home and literally travels the roads of the country in his search for the typically masculine goals of independence and control, while at the same time, he yearns for the figure of a warm father and tries to find it in Bernard Geffen. On the other hand, this conflict between home and the road is also apparent in female characters like Clara Walpole, who runs away from home but thinks of her father often, clinging to his surname in times of emotional turmoil; and in Shelley from *Wonderland*, who flees from his father yet keeps on writing to him and

giving him clues to her whereabouts. Besides, both girls indeed adhere to gender roles by maintaining their dependence on men and exchanging the relationship with (and the submission to) the Father for a relationship with a husband or lover.

Fossum also argues that the yearnings of Oates's adolescents, whether for home or the road, are "expressions of a struggle to control their own lives against the forces of 'accident,' circumstances, [and] other people" (qtd. in Daly 6). Daly believes that Fossum is accurate, but argues that he is minimizing the desire for relationship suggested in the metaphor of "home," perhaps because Fossum's theory is based on male's experience and thus places more emphasis on the issues of control and autonomy. As Daly asserts, whether we are at home or outside, we define ourselves in terms of others; but the problem of self-definition is complex, especially for daughters. While a son expects to inherit the necessary power to be the author of his own life, a daughter does not, and this is why these women are more anxious about assuming agency than men. Thus, the question of leaving home differs for sons and daughters (Daly 6). In fact, Oates has commented that the central question is "why we leave home or make vain attempts to leave home, or failing that, yearn to leave home. There are many ways of leaving" (qtd. in Daly 6). Some of these attempts, Oates goes on, are literal, while others are imaginative; but the problem is that "while you're away, trying to map out another life, new parents or stray adults or simply someone with an I. Q. one point above you conquers you. They just walk up to you and take hold" (qtd. in Daly 6). This is plainly perceived in *Wonderland*, with Noel's abuses of Shelley. This problem is greater for young women: "The puzzle is: how do we become these people who victimize us? They are so charming, so much in control of their bitten-off part of the world; they are so very masculine" (Oates qtd. in Daly 6-7). The problem of how to free young people from debilitating notions of selfhood continued to intrigue Oates during the 1960s (Daly 7).

Thus, as Daly remarks, Oates recognized that in order to challenge socially constructed identities, she had to do something beyond simply reversing male and female gender roles. Transforming her female adolescents into questors, that is, heroes who would "kill" the Father in order to claim his cultural authority would mean perpetuating violent

means of self-definition. During the 1960s, Oates continued to portray violent articulate sons who, in order to become the authors of their lives, dominate passively inarticulate daughters, whom they claim as characters in their own fictions (7). A good example of this could be Jules, who incarnates several protagonist roles of fictions he has designed and at the same time tries to dominate the women around him (namely, Nadine and Vera) and turn them into his dreamed high-class, ideal and submissive lover. In conclusion, female characters need to gain control over their lives and stop being characters' in the "narratives" created by men: they need to become the protagonists of their own stories. This acquisition of direct control on the part of female characters is gradually seen in Oates's work. One of the novels that reflects this transformation more transparently is *Bloodsmoor*, where the submissive daughters of a traditional Victorian family, the Zinns, progressively get rid of the rigid gender impositions of obedience, prudery, submission and chastity by rebelling against their parents in order to make their own choices about their sexualities and professions. Friedman notices a parallelism between *Bloodsmoor* and *Mulvaney's*, arguing that in both novels, while the phallic power of the father recedes, the rest of the family prospers and looks into the future ("Feminism" 488).

In general, the interconnections between gender and running away can also be attributed to the fact that, in the corpus, women accept and embrace mobility more easily than men. This trait can be associated to Oatesian female characters' gift for resistance, for the overcoming of traumas and the moving on into the future, while assuming that it is impossible to completely erase one's past. On the one hand, Marianne Mulvaney adapts to her expulsion from the family, even if it is not a simple process. She is thus eventually able to assume the identity that results from the trauma of her rape, in contrast with her father Michael, who clings to Marianne's previous identity (more precisely, to his image of that identity) and to the ideal family that it represents, with terrible consequences. On the other hand, in *Garden*, Carleton has been forced to adopt a migrant lifestyle, but he yearns to become established in a farm like the one he used to have: he is constantly dreaming of coming back to a past that is actually irretrievable.

The most blatant exception to this pattern of female mobility and male fixedness are Juliet from *Carthage* and Jules and Maureen from *them*. Juliet has indeed moved on with her life and formed a family after her sister's disappearance, but she has not overcome the trauma of losing her sister, and specially, her fiancé. Her evolution is only external, as Cressida's reappearance proves by opening old wounds in her. Besides, Jules is one of the most restless characters from the corpus, always ready to move on into the next adventure and to reinvent himself; whereas his sister Maureen dreams of social upward mobility to achieve stability.

As noticed, many of these characters yearn to return home. According to Friedman, in Oates, freedom becomes a greater burden than the lives the characters leave behind. This past is the element that holds their identity. To reclaim it, they must learn to suffer reality, resign themselves to its limitations and re-enter time and history. The process of initiation requires, according to Ihab Hassan, a reconciliation with home, endeavor in history and the final acceptance of death. In this process, dreams surrender to reality (qtd. in Friedman *Joyce* 22). In Oates, the process is completed when the character proves to be a survivor. Oates follows her survivors until they reclaim their place in time. The typical ending of her novels entails a character returning "home" or places her/him in the context of marriage or in some other way that restores him to the stream of history (Friedman *Joyce* 21-22). This description totally fits the plot of *Carthage*. After disappearing, Cressida feels free from the pain that she had felt at home; but in time, the remorse over her abrupt department takes over and she initiates a process of reflection that culminates with her acknowledgement of both her limitations and her past actions. She eventually re-enters history by coming back home to mend her mistakes.

In sum, adolescence is then a crucial step in the process of growing up. Adolescence is not a time of rebellion, crisis, pathology or deviance; it is a time of evaluation, decision-making, commitment, and carving out a place in the world (Santrock 14). This is the reason why the process of creating and consolidating one's identity undergoes a critical phase during adolescence, and of course, the family has an unescapable influence in this process.

In order to analyze to which extent the family has an impact over the development of the self, we shall present the identity development of Cressida from *Carthage* and Jesse from *Wonderland*. Remarkably, both Jesse and Cressida are in the transitional period of adolescence for a great part of the novels. Jesse is fourteen years old at the beginning of *Wonderland*, and so he is in his early adolescence and about to enter middle adolescence; while Cressida is nineteen years old when the initial events in *Carthage* take place, so she is between late adolescence and young adulthood. These are periods of great changes, physically, cognitively and emotionally: Jesse is starting to realize and determine the boundaries of his own independent self, while Cressida needs to notice the extent of her family influence over her self and create her own identity in a more independent manner.

## **5.2 IDENTITY FORMATION**

In this section, we shall define and describe how the process of creation of identity develops and to what extent the family influences such development. In order to analyze these questions, we shall mainly focus on the identity development of Cressida and Jesse since they stand at opposite positions regarding the family influence in the formation of their identity; that is, their identities are constructed upon opposite family conditions: Jesse's family referential figures are constantly abandoning him, and therefore he is constantly looking for them and trying to prevent them from leaving; while Cressida has a larger number of familial referents, but her attitude toward them is rather inconsistent.

Jesse represents the best example from this corpus of how a family shapes identity, and how lingering its influence may be upon someone's personality. In fact, one of the novel's central themes is the complexities of identity, as stated in the novel's dedication, which according to Oates, exposes the "secret heart" of the novel ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 480): "This book is for all of us who pursue the phantasmagoria of personality" (*Wonderland* 2). Cressida, on the other hand, is both derisive of and reliant on her family: she is proud of her reputation as an intelligent girl, but she despises the family that gave her that very reputation. She is also rather spoiled by her family; but she does neither realize nor admit it for most of the novel.

The theoretical framework for this section revolves around the notions of personhood, self, and agency, which are interrelated aspects of a theoretical reconfiguring of human psychology, as exposed by Martin et al.

### **5.2.1 Self and Personhood**

Personhood is, essentially, the ability to make choices and act on them to impact one's life and the lives of others. Persons, or psychological persons, are constituted by biological, chemical, and neurophysiological substrates, as well as sociocultural practices, conventions and means, but they are irreducible to these constituents. Persons are identifiable, embodied, reasoning, and moral agents with self-consciousness and self-understanding, as well as social and psychological identity who have unique capabilities of language use and are distinctively culture capable. Being embodied refers to having a physical, biological body in constant contrast with the physical and sociocultural lifeworld; while being identifiable means having distinct physical characteristics and social identities. Social identity refers to socially constructed and socially meaningful categories that are appropriated and internalized by individuals as descriptive of themselves and/or various groups to which they belong (e. g., female, African-American, attorney, etc.) (Martin et al. v, 9, 27).

Psychological personhood is composed by two key aspects: agency as self-determination and self as understanding, two concepts that need an exhaustive analysis that shall be offered in due time. Generally speaking, agency refers to the activity of a person in the world, which emerges from prereflective activity as part of the developmental unfolding of an individual life within a collective lifeworld. More precisely, human agency is the deliberate, reflective activity of a human being in framing, choosing and executing her/his actions in a way that is not fully determined by factors other than her/his own understanding and reasoning (those factors include external constraints and coercions, and internal constraints over which the person has no conscious control). Agency is then understood as a kind of self-determination (Martin et al. 29).



The second aspect that defines psychological personhood is the self as understanding. The self is an ever changing, dynamic process of understanding particular being. Self, as a core and a necessary aspect of personhood, is related to a particular identity, embodied being, and deliberative, reflective agency in ways that give it an existential and experiential grounding. This grounding ensures some necessary degree of stability within an overall pattern of processual change (Martin et al. 32).

The self is recognizable to itself, even as it shifts and evolves. As such, self as an understanding of particular being is capable of taking aspects of itself (such as beliefs, desires, reasons and values) as intentional objects. When such second-order, self-reflective capability emerges within the contextualized and developmental trajectory of an individual life, full-fledged personhood is attained. Such persons are potentially capable of influencing, to a certain extent, those sociocultural contexts that are indispensable to their own development as persons. The self is a particular kind of understanding that discloses and extends a person's being and activity in the world. The comprehension of one's unique existence imbues individual experience and action in the world with significance and provides a phenomenal sense of being present (Martin et al. 28, 32-33).

In sum, self emerges developmentally as an understanding capable of reflectively taking both sociocultural practices and meanings, and aspects of itself (desires, reasons, and deliberations extracted from immersion in requisite sociocultural practices and meanings) as intentional objects. As a consequence, possibilities resident in the lifeworld are made available to human agents in the world. In this sense, the selves are understandings that disclose and extend particular being within traditions of living (Martin et al. 32, 36-38).

In the following paragraphs, we shall meticulously analyze the process by which Jesse and Cressida construct their self-awareness and exert their agency within the context of their families. For achieving this purpose, we shall refer to the previous framework by Martin et al. Cressida and Jesse experience a great shift in their personal understanding throughout the novels; a process that is not totally culminated in any of them. This proves Martin et al.'s assertion that the

process of understanding a particular self is dynamic and in constant transformation. More specifically, Cressida has based her self on external references she has assimilated as her own, while at the same time concealing some of her most salient identity traits, whereas Jesse, due to the initial loss of all his family, is deprived of his biological family referential figures and tries to compensate for this loss by adopting new models upon which he can model his self.

The self is created from an early period. Human infants mature and develop within inescapable historical and sociocultural contexts. The sociocultural world of linguistic and other relational practices comes increasingly to constitute the emergent understanding of infants. Caregivers and others interact with infants in ways that furnish them with practices, forms and means of personhood and identity that exist in their particular society. Therefore, they come to talk and relate in the same way as others have talked and related to them, and so they come to understand some of the lifeworld that surrounds them (i.e., history, culture, social relations, etc.) and what their being in it consists. They gradually become capable of increasingly sophisticated feats of recollection and imagination. Along with this, comes the gradual understanding of one's embodied being in the world as a center of experiencing, understanding, intending and acting. This is how self-understanding emerges and continues to develop, and so, thought and action are no longer entirely determined by sociocultural practices, and psychological persons also contribute to relational practices in innovative ways that reflect a self-interpreting agency. Psychological persons, then, are able to contribute to the very sociocultural contexts that created them (Martin et al. 33-34). While these novels do not exhaustively depict the childhood of Jesse or Cressida, their further relationships with the contexts that created them can be fully appreciated: Jesse is constantly forced to adapt to new changes and manages to do so in a successful manner; whereas Cressida cannot deal with the alterations brought about by her change of context, especially when she goes to university.

Much of our conscious understanding as psychological persons implies attempts to penetrate the assumptions, conventions and meanings hidden in those contexts of which we are a part (Martin et al.

35): for instance, Cressida needs to go beyond her reputation as the “smart daughter” and the world she has always known in order to find her true self; whereas Jesse needs to discover his true identity and to what extent other people have influenced him.

Once psychological persons with self-understanding have emerged from developmental contexts, our further psychological development consists in understanding more and more of that context, even as this context shifts in interaction with our actions. The development of a capacity for reflective understanding makes us achieve some critical distance from tradition and from our ascribed identifications, and, by doing so, critique and revise our practices, ends, and ourselves (Martin et al. 35-36, 43). Cressida finds this process especially challenging, although she will gradually come to understand her context even as it changes due to her actions, and in the end, she does develop a capacity for reflection which helps her to realize the implications of her disappearance from a detached point of view.

### **5.2.2 The Self and its Contexts: The Self and the Other**

From all the aforementioned theory, we may conclude that the self is not created in isolation. According to John Macmurray, the self is constituted by its relationship with the Other. For him, the Other refers to all the people that interact with us and with each other (qtd. in Martin et al. 90). This starts early in life with caregivers. Thus, the original reference of the act of existing is the Other, which first appears with the presence or absence of care provided by the figure of caregivers (Martin et al. 92-93).

It is obvious that Oates also recognizes the importance of the Other in one’s life: she has remarked how tragic it is to be isolated. For her, as long as the myth of separate and competitive selves endures, society will remain “obsessed with adolescent ideas of being superior, of conquering, of destroying” (qtd. in Waller *Dreaming* 57). This is one of Jesse’s problems: his immense sense of ego and wish to control those around him. Cressida is also a narcissistic person.

All knowledge, Martin et al. argue, begins with distinguishing the presence and absence of the Other. Recognizing this pattern leads to early awareness of succession, expectancy, refusal and reconciliation,

as well as distinctions such as fantasy versus reality, true versus false or right versus wrong. The basic human motives of love and fear can be also traced to the feelings of comfort and discomfort associated with the rhythm of withdrawal and return which becomes inextricably fused into personal experience (Martin et al. 93). The experience of Cressida's identity formation is strongly based on experiences of withdrawal and return, which are related to her ambiguous feelings of closeness and distance toward her family and beloved ones, as we shall soon explain.

Jesse's identity formation is also heavily marked by his relation to the Other, whose actions have a definite influence over him (this is somewhat ironical, because, through his relationship to the Other during the process of identity formation, he comes to believe in the omnipotence of his ego and to impose his will to others), because as MacMurray asserts, the world and other people resist our actions and act upon us, and in so doing create a relational context of possibility and constraint in which intentional personal agency can be made manifest and develop. Resistance to our actions supports and guides individual development. Self-consciousness emerges and develops as a kind of mutual self-revelation that transpires only within the context of relationship. That is, by revealing and contrasting ourselves in relation, we convey our appreciation of the Other's significance to us, and at the same time, participate in their self-constitution (qtd. in Martin et al. 94). Jesse is plenty aware (and resentful) of this: "It distressed Jesse that he must always exist in the eyes of others, their power extended in him though he did not chose them [...] They were a pressure on him, in his head, a pressure he loathed" (*Wonderland* 163).

It is obvious that taking the perspectives of others is essential to develop and maintain good interpersonal and community relationships, and for the development of individuals as persons capable of entering into such relations (Martin et al. 117). Consequently, it is mainly through our worldly activity with others that we come to know ourselves, others and our world (Martin et al. 136). As we shall soon explain, Cressida's and Jesse's self-understanding are heavily based on their relationship to their families, and this is mainly prompted by the disruption of their everyday routines.

As anticipated, human subjectivity exhibits concern for itself. Psychological persons are self-aware and concerned: as Heidegger argued, they care about their own existence (qtd. in Martin et al. 36). This care is manifested through understanding, which opens possibilities for psychological persons to develop and expand themselves. Understanding implies finding a kind of valuing, of significance and personal meaning in the world (Martin et al. 36).

Human understanding is both tacit and explicit. Tacit understanding is the “know how” that comes from acting with others in general accord with, but without explicit recognition and articulation of the conventions, norms, and shared assumptions of the sociocultural context. Explicit understanding is achieved through a more purposefully engaged interpretation of the lifeworld in relation to particular concerns of a psychological person (Martin et al. 37).

Tacit understanding may become explicit, particularly when the concerns of a psychological person are thwarted in some way that requires the individual to penetrate the tacit, taken-for-granted background of historical and sociocultural practices that yield meaning and potential intelligibility. Given that tacit understanding is typically sufficient for the execution of everyday routines, it is the opening of possibilities through flexible agency and interpretive activity that enables a psychological person to develop beyond whatever set of tacit understandings that currently constitute that individual’s way of being in the lifeworld. This is particularly true of the self, that is, the understanding that discloses and extends one’s particular being in the world (Martin et al. 37).

Interpretative understanding begins with a concern related to a psychological person’s care for her/his particular being and evolves into some kind of inquiry into the world of experience. This concern may be relatively minor (e.g., locating an alternative route to work due to heavy traffic) or major (e.g., attempting to discover what has gone wrong in a relationship). Concerns may lead to other further inquiries and to possible reorganization of relatively small or large areas of understanding, experience and activity. Interpretative understanding is always ongoing, mutable and incomplete: it ebbs and flows, as concerns arise in the course of living (Martin et al. 37).

Self-understanding, the authors conclude, does not discover facts about the properties of an inner substance or entity but expresses how psychological persons have dealt with and are dealing with questions of their own existence or being. Such understanding is not only about relations among interpretations and ascriptions concerning any particular, embodied being, but also it is also related with the background or lifeworld with which all particular being unfolds (Martin et al. 37-38).

The explicit understanding enabled by deliberative agency is always partial and incomplete when considered against the historical and sociocultural background from which it emerges and within which it continues to unfold. Most of what we perceive, think and do in our everyday life escapes conscious reflection, because we typically take for granted the assumptions buried in this background. It is only when our everyday routines are disrupted in some way that requires our conscious attention that we may notice certain things about our taken-for-granted world of practices (Martin et al. 35). For instance, Jesse becomes more aware of the world around him after all the shocking abandonments he suffers. Cressida suffers a physical assault by Brett Kincaid, as well as a traumatic experience of disappearance before she notices the impact of her behavior upon her family. In fact, in Oates's fiction violence often disrupts everyday assumptions and routines, and this disruption brings about some new understanding of the characters' selves. We detect this in *Garden*, after Carleton's assault of Clara; in *them*, after Maureen's physical assault by Furlong and Jules's shooting by Nadine; in *Expensive*, after Nada's murder; in *Mulvaney's*, with the rape of Marianne; and in *Bird*, after both Zoe's and Edward's violent deaths.

### **5.3 IDENTITY FORMATION: CRESSIDA'S SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

Before discussing Cressida's deep experiences of withdrawal and return, we shall concentrate on the defining traits of her personality and the complex manner into which she understands her own self.

Cressida's identity is based on her family's and other people's perceptions: namely, on the fact that she has always been classified as the "smart one," while her sister has been declared "the beautiful one."

This dual labelling of “smart/beautiful” brings reminiscences of classical fairy-tales: Oates herself has confirmed that the novel starts like a fairy tale featuring two sisters (“*Carthage Fitzgerald*” n. p.). Cressida herself notices this alliance to the genre: “*There are fairy tales in which one sister is the good beautiful sister—one sister is blessed. And another sister is damned. I am that sister. The damned sister*” (*Carthage* 326, emphasis in the original). This fairy tale will eventually transform into a Gothic tale when Juliet’s fair-prince/fiancé Brett undergoes a horrifying transformation and is accused of homicide and imprisoned, while one of the sisters mysteriously disappears.

The novel thus presents the sisters as having quite opposed natures. Thus, the labels “smart/beautiful” establish an opposition between the sisters’ identities that is manifested in other personal traits: for instance, it entails the idea that, if Juliet is the beautiful one, Cressida should be the ugly one (and in fact she is described as being more ordinary than her sister). Apart from this, Cressida is opposed to her sister in other aspects: Juliet is presented as a nice girl who has many friends who adore her; while Cressida is an inconsiderate girl with few friends who are not too close to her. In summary, Juliet and Cressida are initially presented as simple opposed figures, but as the plot progresses, we find that they are much more complex.

Cressida, who seems to have internalized this role as the bad sister, adopts a malicious behavior toward Juliet. And so, even if Cressida’s self-understanding is based on others’ perception, she does not simply passively accept it but actively contributes to its formation. As explained, the self is partly constructed upon its relation to the Other, which offers a relational context of possibility and constraint to the subject. In this case, as the smart, evil sister, she feels legitimized to behave cruelly to others. As a result, instead of creating her own identity, Cressida becomes a character created by others, just like Richard from *Expensive*. This is a serious threat to her real identity.

Martin et al.’s definition on agency, involving three main traits, and based on previous historical approaches to the concept of agency,<sup>37</sup> may

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<sup>37</sup> Traditionally, philosophical arguments around agency have been placed on a strict contradiction between free choice and complete casual determinism, perspectives often contemplated as incompatible. Libertarians (like the eighteenth-century philosopher Thomas Reid and twentieth-century philosopher Roderick Chisholm) argue that free choice exists; and

be helpful to explain the complexity of Cressida's attitude. First, for Martin et al., agency does not need to be affected by factors and conditions other than an agent's own authentic, reflective understanding and reasoning. It only must not be determined fully by such other factors, a state of affairs they refer to as "underdetermination." Second, even when a given motive or desire has been initially established by factors such as social conditioning or genetics, the actor remains an agent as long as she/he has assimilated such motives or desires so as to make them objects of her/his own deliberation. Third, when the authors assert that agency is underdetermined by other factors, this does not mean that agency is necessarily undetermined, only that it must itself figure in its own determination: this is what is meant by self-determination. Thus, Martin et al. favor the view that an agentic capability in deliberation and action is compatible with a deterministic, nonmysterious, and nonreductive account of the development of human agency within biological/physical, historical and sociocultural contexts. Thus, resorting to Martin et al., we may assert that Cressida is an agent of her own actions, since she seems to have assimilated motives initially

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that free choice and complete casual determinism are the direct opposites of each other; concluding that, by the law of contradiction, complete casual determinism is false. Hard determinists (such as eighteenth-century thinkers like Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, twentieth-century behaviorists and a few contemporary philosophers like Ted Honderich) believe that complete casual determinism is true, and that free choice and complete casual determinism are the direct opposites of each other, concluding that, again by the law of contradiction, free choice does not exist. In contrast, Thomas Hobbes, the progenitor of many ideas that have influenced the contemporary psychological treatment of personhood, has a vision of agency that has been regarded as dissolutionist, because it aims at dissolving the debate between strict determinism and free will. He claims that the freedoms we embrace in everyday life are not really ruled out by hard determinism and that complete free will is unintelligible. Hobbes declares that determinism is required to make sense of the idea of freedom as self-determination. For Hobbes, the conditions of chaos that would result in the absence of self-determination can hardly be viewed as an adequate context for purposeful self-determination. According to Hobbes, basic human needs, capabilities, desires, and motivations are formed within each individual independently of social interactions and historical traditions. As a result, freedom of choice is not negated by determinism, but rather it is itself a kind of casually determined sequence of events. Hobbes' theories met much opposition, but the Hobbesian account of agency still holds a contentious and yet central place in current scholarship regarding the nature of human action and experience (Martin et al. 19-22).



established as social or genetic conditioning so as to make them objects of her/his own deliberation.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, Cressida is an agent because she has assimilated her reputation as real and as a product of her own reflection even if it originates in the external perceptions of other people. She is not totally motivated by these external prompts, however: she also actively contributes to construct her identity on the base of such traits as intelligent, smart, and malicious. Besides, some of her choices may be possibly motivated by factors other than agency, in this case, by her (possible) autistic spectrum disorder, the full extent of which is not explained in the novel.

### 5.3.1 Cressida and Juliet: Psychological Violence

As a result of her enactment of the “evil sister,” Cressida feels legitimized to psychologically attack her sister Juliet by being covertly cruel toward her out of jealousy. In this manner, this violence is not only mere jealousy but also an exaggerated acting out of her role as the “evil” sister, summarized in Cressida’s “efforts to thwart and undermine the older [sister]’s efforts to be *good*” (*Carthage* 73, emphasis in the original).

Having already provided a theoretical framework for adult psychological violence in the chapter “Mothers,” we shall presently simply focus on exposing the terms in which these aggressions occur in *Carthage*. Cressida’s psychological maltreatment of Juliet occurs in

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<sup>38</sup> The only factors and conditions other than agency (understood as self-determination) that might determine human choice (aside from explicit coercion that is not always present) are: a) physical or biological (that is, neurophysiological) states and processes; b) sociocultural rules and practices; c) unconscious processes over which an agent has no control; d) random (chance) events. Assuming that these options exhaust plausible possibilities for explaining human choice and action (other than the positing of human agency understood as self-determination in the manner we have specified in our definition of agency), elimination of each and all of these options as fully determinate of human choice and action will establish the underdetermination of human agency by factors and conditions other than agency (in the authors’ sense of self-determination) itself (Martin et al. 29-30). Since the authors reject fully biological and cultural determination of human action, and argue against random chance and unconscious processes alone, we are left with the possibility that human choice and action, at least in part and sometimes, results from the authentic (irreducible) understanding and reasoning of human agents. Thus, such self-determination means that human agency is not reducible to physical, biological, sociocultural, and/or random/unconscious processes, even though all of these may be required for, and/or help to constitute it (Martin et al. 32).

isolation: she does not abuse her sister in any other manner. This is a rare occurrence, since psychological maltreatment regularly accompanies other forms of violence. In this case, Cressida does not only feel hatred for her sister; but she also loves her, which causes remorse in her: “So frequently sick with spite, jealously, envy of her popular-pretty sister whom all adored, *and whom Cressida herself adored*” (*Carthage* 358, emphasis in the original).

Cressida harasses her sister mainly by interfering with her possessions. For instance, she appropriates Juliet’s belongings, such as her mobile phone, and tosses them away; or cuts some threads on the inside of a sweater that their grandmother had given Juliet in order to ruin it; or she deletes some of Juliet’s emails out of spite and jealousy:

Why should her sister have so many friends, even these shallow, silly friends, while Cressida had so few friends?—it was unjust. Particularly, Cressida resented the letters that ended with *Love*—for she herself rarely received emails from classmates only just one or two girls, and in all of these there were no *Loves*. (*Carthage* 358, emphasis in the original)

Cressida would like to receive the same attentions but still “remain herself, yet be admired, loved, adored as her sister was” (*Carthage* 299).

Cressida applies psychological destabilization when she damages Juliet’s files on the computer. Psychological destabilization involves acts that leave victims confused and unsure of the validity of their own perceptions (Tolman et al. 326). In this case, Juliet is dismayed to see the damage in her computer, which she believes to be her own fault. Afterwards, Cressida helps to restore it when Juliet asks for her help: “*Oh Cressie! Can you help me? I’m so stupid!—I must have done something wrong— [...] So Cressida took pity on her older sister: Ok, hey I guess I’m the ‘smart one,’ I’ll try*” (*Carthage* 358, emphasis in the original). With these words, Cressida is implying that, if she is the smart one, then her sister must necessarily be the dumb one. Moreover, she seems pleased that her sister needs her assistance; when in fact she would not need it had Cressida not damaged her files. This behavior is

obviously aimed at making Juliet unsure of her capacities while at the same time dependent on Cressida, a fact that would revalue her.

The causes of Cressida's covert attacks are generated in her spitefulness toward her sister. Cressida envies her sister's larger number of friends and her beauty; and covertly takes revenge upon her for possessing these qualities she would have wished to have, too. The most salient feature of Cressida's psychological harassment of Juliet is its stealthy nature. There are two main reasons for this. The first is Cressida's wish to avoid an overt confrontation with her sister, which would not only be highly unpleasant, but will also prevent her from going on with her revengeful behavior. The second reason is that if these acts were discovered, she would have to openly admit her resentment toward her sister, and she is not ready to do this because she pretends to be above superficial issues such as external beauty, but there is evidence of how much they do affect her:

How much an adolescent girl rather be *pretty*, than *smart*!  
For of course, Cressida was invariably judged *too smart*.  
As in *too smart for her own good*. As in *too smart for a  
girl her age*. (*Carthage* 37, emphasis in the original)

This excerpt shows the common reductionist tendency of placing labels on people; as well as the sexist stereotype of considering that girls should not be "too" intelligent because that is detrimental for them. Besides, Cressida's secret wish reveals the strong influence of gender stereotypes upon women. As Oates has asserted, beauty is one of "the most superficial yet seemingly necessary qualities of femininity" (*Woman* 124); and Cressida seems to have interiorized this belief. Cressida's conduct may originally stem from her immaturity, as well as the severe identity crisis she is facing, which prevents her from successfully dealing with her ambiguous feelings towards her family and her own self.

In the chapter "Mothers," we have discussed the role of sadism in psychological violence, which Baumeister describes as the exertion of "empathy without sympathy." In Baumeister's words, these occurrences are obvious in cases of emotional abuse of intimates or family members, who can be easily hurt by knowing their

vulnerabilities, since the empathic bond to other person becomes a vehicle to facilitate cruelty. The success of emotional abuse relies then on knowing what to say or do to provoke the victim's pain (245, 247). Cressida represents a good example of this, because she knows that making her tidy and organized sister believe that she is losing her belongings will upset her.

Thus, Baumeister continues, there might be considerable cruelty in a family without violence: for instance, by spoiling something that the victim loves, like preventing someone to see his favorite show on television. Isolated acts like this might not seem very relevant, but they might form part of a daily pattern of systematically ruining the other person's enjoyment (248). An example of this is Cressida's erasure of her sister's e-mails. This is not something violent, in fact, Juliet does not know about it; but it aims at preventing her from the pleasure of receiving the messages from her friends. Juliet never discovers her sister as the author of these events, or even recognizes them as violent actions; but she is conscious of Cressida's resentful inclinations. In any case, for a long time, Juliet tends to try to justify her sister, and considers that she "is a good person in her heart [j ] but this is not always evident" (*Carthage* 24).

### **5.3.2 Cressida's Negotiation of Herself**

Cressida's main identity traits are defined by her relation of opposition with her sister, which is reiterated by her family. This leads her to assume a specific profile as the smart, ugly and unpleasant sister which does not always correspond to her actual tastes, interests or identity. For a while, she tries to overcome the rigid identity traits that she has assumed and explore new ways of defining herself, and she signs up as a volunteer for tutoring mathematics to middle school students. She is trying to overcome the tacit understanding of herself by trying applying an explicit and more profound understanding of her environment and interacting with it in new ways. But her impulsivity and hyper sensibility lead her to resign when one student calls her "homely."

She is then back to her old pseudo-identity, the one which has led her to envy her sister and subject her to psychological violence, to be

impulsive, to be distant in her relationships to others because she does not feel beloved, to be cruel to those who really appreciate her, to find it difficult to recognize her love for others, and to feel unique and misunderstood, as seen in her relationship with Brett.

Creating bonds to others is essential to grow up, but this is extremely complicated for Cressida, who is unable to see that the reasons behind her detachment from others are precisely found in her own distant attitude, which provokes a loop; that is, she is cold toward her family and friends and separates from them; so that they do activities without her, which makes her feel hurt and behave coldly once more. Actually, her perception of not being loved is so extreme that she is convinced that not even her family loves her. This will contribute to her voluntary disappearance, for which she initially blames her family: “They had cast her away in shame and derision. She was the *ugly one*, unloved” (*Carthage* 219, emphasis in the original).

In fact, Cressida is totally convinced that Juliet receives more love than she does. As Phelan asserts, the question “Do you love me?” is “an elaboration of the questions ‘Do you see me?’ and ‘Do you hear me?’” (31). Cressida feels that they cannot love her, because, in the first place, they cannot see her true self. If this were correct, to a certain extent she would be to blame as well, since she has not let them access her true self, paradoxically as a consequence of her attempt to match up the standards of her role as an indifferent girl: she is unable to openly express her need for the love of others. She even has problems to recognize or express her love for Brett to herself: “Never thinking *I love him*. For Cressida had not that capacity, for either the emotion or its articulation” (*Carthage* 364, emphasis in the original). In fact, her mother attributes this trait to her daughter’s narcissism, considering that Cressida “*could not love anyone like herself*” (*Carthage* 124, emphasis in the original). This is basically correct because the narcissistic Cressida thinks highly of herself, but she also hides many insecurities behind her mask of confidence: she does not love herself as much as she appears to do, and she is neither as comfortable with herself as it seems.

Moreover, the use that Cressida makes of the word “love” when she confesses her feelings to Brett later on is highly significant: “*Brett*

*please I know this: no one can love you like I can, now. Now you are—changed. I promise I can love you enough, I can love enough for two, it won't matter if you don't love me*” (*Carthage* 171, emphasis in the original). Even at this time of vulnerability she emphasizes, perhaps inadvertently, her superiority toward other people by stating how exceptionally strong her feelings are. Partly due to her difficulties expressing her love for others, Cressida does not have many friends and she does not appreciate her few ones. She just has one close friend, Marcy Meyer, and her behavior toward her is contemptuous: Cressida is indeed deliberately cruel to people who are nice to her. The fact that Marcy does not defend herself is also significant, because it allows Cressida to mock her with impunity; and one might wonder if this is one of the reasons why Cressida treats her like that in the first place: because she knows that Marcy will good-humoredly accept her mockery.

One of Cressida’s challenges when confronting who she is comes from the fact that she has always been considered an exceptional and unique girl. As her father observes: “*Cressida is one-of-a-kind. She doesn't give a damn for what other girls care for, she's special*” (*Carthage* 68, emphasis in the original). Her name is also a mark of how she, as well as her sister, was expected by their parents to be special from birth: “*Your mother and I chose our daughters' names with particular care. Because we don't think that either of you is ordinary. So an ordinary name isn't appropriate*” (*Carthage* 35, emphasis in the original). Both names, Cressida and Juliet, evoke famous Shakespearean characters, from the plays *Troilus and Cressida* (1609) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), respectively; but “Cressida” is a far more uncommon name than Juliet. After Cressida investigates its origins, she becomes incensed with her parents:

“Cressida”—or “Criseyde”—isn't nice at all. She's “faithless”—that's how people thought of her in the Middle Ages. Chaucer wrote about her, and then Shakespeare. First she was in love with a soldier named Troilus—then she was in love with another man—and when that ended, she had no one. And no one loved her, or cared about her—that was Cressida's fate. (*Carthage* 38)

Cressida is disturbed about these implications because they appear to confirm her imagined fate: no one shall ever care for her. In contrast, the Shakespearean resonances of her sister's name, Juliet, are those of an unyielding mutual love.

In any case, from her birth, Cressida has been expected to be the most exceptional child of the family, and internalizing this external belief and assuming it as her own, she decides to be proud of being totally different and even expects to receive a special treatment everywhere. To a certain extent she succeeds in being unique, because she is an outstandingly intelligent and imaginative girl, but she still has problems meeting the standards of exceptionality set for her, especially when she goes to college. Moreover, other traits of her character, such as her hypersensitivity to the slightest criticism and her impulsive behavior, make things more complicated for her even when she realizes that these reactions are detrimental to her. For instance, since an early age she develops a passion for the artist M. C. Escher and starts to draw pictures that resemble his; but when one of her school teachers advises her to develop her own artistic style, she feels so wounded that she almost fails that subject. Ironically, she had tried to be unique and differentiate herself through art, but her creations are an imitation of another artist. This is another example of how Cressida has come to rely too much on models (not only her family, but also Escher) which make her utterly incapable of constructing her own self upon her own premises or exerting her own agency as derived from her own reflective processes. In other words, she depends excessively on the perception of others.

The exceptionality that others attribute to Cressida and that she has assumed and cultivated leads her to distance herself from what is close to her, mainly her family and friends, and seek acceptance and inclusion away from them. This alienation makes her, on the one hand, think that the now disfigured and unsociable Brett as a consequence of his traumatic war experience is her soul mate, the only one that can understand her, despite the fact that they are not particularly close. On the other hand, she deliberately constructs a shield that hides her true temperament from her beloved ones:

she's fabricated a shrewd-canny-cool Cressida-self who hadn't given a damn for boys, and now didn't give a damn for young men; a sarcastic girl who joked—(cruelly, unconsciously)—about those few boys who'd seemed to “like” her in high school. [...] Never would Cressida have confessed to Marcy how she felt about Brett Kinkaid. Never hide her face in her hands, and weep—*Oh God! I want to die, I love him so much.* (*Carthage* 297, emphasis in the original)

This conscious artificiality is one of the indicators that the personality she shows to the world is not constructed upon real traits derived from her own reflective thoughts, and as such, it is doomed to collapse.

Thus, when Cressida confesses her love to Brett, she tells him that “[the] *two of us understand each other. Misfits, freaks—now you know what it's like* [to be like her due to his war injuries] *and it has deepened you and made you more like me*” (*Carthage* 171, emphasis in the original). She also asserts that now that they are “disfigured,” they have become soul mates (*Carthage* 295). This confession is Cressida's last attempt to find love and a place among those whom she considers exceptional as herself. Besides, her choice of words shows once more the exceptional traces she tends to associate with her persona: the fact that she is a “freak” makes her special. However, this word also points out to her inner insecurities and feelings of inadequacy when compared to the rest.

In the next segment, we shall highlight how Cressida's experiences of withdrawal and return force her to question her assumptions about her identity and to reassess it.

### **5.3.3 Cressida's Withdrawals and Return: Family, College and Disappearance**

In sum, Cressida experiences three main episodes of withdrawal; that is, her ambivalence toward her family, her identity crisis at college and her eventual disappearance; and one episode of return which involves both coming back to find her own self and reuniting with her family.



First of all, Cressida has ambivalent feelings of closeness and distance concerning her belonging to the Mayfield family, which have been already discussed. She usually rejects them at an emotional level by being cold, distant and even mocking them; moreover, she is fiercely defensive of her independence and reluctant to be fully integrated within the family activities. She asserts that she is “*not really one of them—the Mayfields*” (*Carthage* 169, emphasis in the original). At the same time, she obviously benefits from the advantages they provide her with. Thus, while she discards the affective family function, she benefits from the protective and economic functions.

The second dynamic of withdrawal takes place when Cressida goes to university. This marks the true beginning of her identity crisis. It also represents a change of context that she cannot efficiently assume. First of all, she misses her family profoundly, not only their physical presence but also the social identity represented by her family surname, as well as the sense of security and belonging that her family provided her with. She is finally realizing her dependence on her family and the protective function they fulfilled for her.

The first thing she notices upon going to university is thus the elimination of part of her social identity:

it was strange, discomfoting, to be away from Carthage, where everyone knew her as the younger Mayfield daughter; she hadn't quite realized how her father's reputation defined and protected her [...] Even as she'd scorned her father's political “reputation”—her family's social “stature”—so she'd taken these for granted, all of her life. And now she was in Canton, New York, not so very far from Carthage, but far enough that no one knew the Mayfield name; or, having heard of it, was much impressed. And now she wasn't living in her parents' house, that had long sheltered and confined her, there was no one to notice, still less to care, if she skipped meals, skipped classes. (*Carthage* 367)

Her family has given her the surname “Mayfield,” which gave her a good reputation in her hometown; but which means nothing at all at college. This quote summarizes as well the ambiguous nature of her

family's influence, represented by their house, which is described both as a shelter and a prison. When leaving her home, she is no longer protected and defined by the Mayfield family, so she is forced to define herself in her own terms, and this will prove to be extremely challenging. Once again, mirroring the episode of her artistic aspirations, she is relying excessively on referential figures instead of trying to find out or construct her own place in the world. However, she only understands this when she goes away from the house that represents her family, and especially, when she lacks the protection that the house symbolizes. These feelings are added to her previous sensation that nobody cares about her.

A similar occurrence is experienced by Margo, the female protagonist of the short story "Dreams" from the collection *Crossing the Border*: when moving, she experiences a "kind of death, because of course her name meant nothing anywhere else" (*Crossing* 84). The short stories from *Crossing the Border* deal with the feeling of dislocation as a consequence of moving to a new country (specifically, Canada) where Oates was living at the moment and the necessary adaptations it implies. In this case, Margo feels empty, like a vessel ready to be filled by anything; and like Cressida, she seems to need confirmation of her identity by others. "Dreams" stresses the relevance of social identity, but its protagonist finds more constructive manners to cope with change than Cressida.

In Oates's novel *I'll Take You There*, the college student protagonist, Annellia, comments that her personality is made out of scraps; that is, different traits from her kin, teachers and fellow students. It resembles a quilt carelessly sewn together, and as such, it falls apart at times, as she recognizes. This resembles Cressida's difficulties to articulate her own identity due to the excess of family referents.

Moreover, Cressida is not the "smart one" at university, not only because no one knows of that reputation, but also because this very trait proves to be somewhat inaccurate: there are other students who are more brilliant than she is, and she does not excel in her courses, partly because she does not make enough effort to do so. There are two main reasons why she does not develop her full potential. First, her impulsive behavior and her excess of pride or narcissism: she is failing to exert

her agency because she is dominated by these internal constraints upon which she has no control. She had done the same in high school, when she failed to hand in work or to study for the final exams because some teachers had hurt her feelings. As a consequence, her average grade had descended and was not good enough to go to the universities she had initially chosen or to receive a grant:

She'd been humbled, disgraced. Her pretensions to being superior had been rebuked. Obscurely she felt that in punishing herself she was punishing her parents and anyone else who'd predicted academic success for her—for how bitterly she resented such facile predictions! (*Carthage* 366)

Therefore, her perception of her self was being torn apart from high school, and she starts to realize this upon going to university: “was the *smart one* really so *smart*, after all?” (*Carthage* 366, emphasis in the original).

The second reason for Cressida's refusal to make a bigger effort in her studies is her immaturity:

At St. Lawrence, she should have excelled. She knew, there was no reason for her not to excel. And at first, she worked in the way of a good, diligent student— [j] then, the old, self-sabotaging impulse set in, her wish to disobey, resist. Like a bratty child she resented *being assigned* anything—that was the crucial problem. A subject she might have zealously researched on her own became boring to her, when it was *assigned*. Like a leash around her neck. (*Carthage* 367, emphasis in the original)

Her childish conception of freedom turns into a disadvantage for her: she is used to exert her will with her family and friends, and so she resents “submitting” to these new tasks at university, and stubbornly neglects her work. However, her resistance can also be a proof of her starting to fight her imposed identity as the smart one: she is unconsciously challenging those assumptions, which were not totally her own.

The episode that finally shatters Cressida's reliance on being the smart one is originated by an enormous, creative and unique project on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* she develops for her subject "Romantics & Revolutionaries." It is not by chance that the project deals with this renowned work of fiction, or that Cressida is so fascinated by it; nor is it a coincidence that *Frankenstein* focuses on the complexities and dangers of creating life and on the subsequent identity and moral problems derived from this, while Cressida is encountering difficulties in asserting her own self. In her article "Frankenstein's Fallen Angel," Oates asserts that Victor Frankenstein is "unable to control the behavior of his demon" (*Woman* 109). Cressida's thesis on the novel for her subject is basically the same provided by Oates's article: "mankind is destined to create monsters that, once created, turn against their creators" (*Carthage* 371). Ironically, this is what will happen to her: the artificial self (partly originated by several external factors, which proves that it is not an exclusive product of her own conscious reflection) as a smart, carefree and harsh girl, upon whom she has lived all her life while hiding, for instance, her secret envy of her sister or her deep love for Brett Kinkaid is about to crumble and to create many difficulties for her. Cressida understands the basic message of Shelley's novel, but fails to see the parallelism between the message of the text and her own life, because as Oates highlights, *Frankenstein* "is meant to prophesize [...] The monsters we create by way of an advanced technological civilization 'are' ourselves as we cannot hope to see ourselves—incomplete, blind, blighted, and, most of all, self-destructive" (*Woman* 117).

In any case, Cressida, absorbed by her project, ignores the deadline, convinced that her professor would not take it into account given the extraordinary quality of her work. She considers the project "one-of-a-kind," just as herself (*Carthage* 371). Once again, she feels unique and expects to receive a special treatment. Although impressed by Cressida's originality, the teacher lowers the grade from A to D due to the unjustified delay, and she feels utterly disappointed with herself for this, eventually connecting this event with previous academic complications that she had faced before, when she had annoyed, disappointed, and shocked her teachers as well as her parents. This new

failure makes her feel that the university has rejected her, while at the same time hits the core of all her insecurities: “*you are so stupid, so ugly*”, she thinks (*Carthage* 375): that is, she realizes that she has totally lost her previous condition as the “smart” sister, while at the same time knowing that she is still the “ugly” one.

This occurrence is such a shock for her that she even considers committing suicide by jumping into the St. Lawrence river as a way out of her misery: “*Better for you to die. Never to have been born,*” she thinks (*Carthage* 377, emphasis in the original). At this point, death is perceived as a release from all pain; but she also asserts that she does not want to be dead, but to disappear, which proves that she is not totally convinced of killing herself at this point. In the end, she is deterred by the thought of Brett, whom she considers her secret friend: she feels that there is some sort of understanding between them, and this gives her new hopes. She also considers her family and finally decides not to commit suicide. Thus, despite her efforts to distance herself from them, her family is proving to be a pervasive influence upon Cressida’s life.

But the deterrent element for her suicidal thoughts is mainly her feelings for Brett, who in her mind becomes a kind of savior for her, reinforcing the image that she has had of him since she first met him casually as a young girl, before he started dating Juliet: Cressida had fallen from her bicycle after being harassed by a driver, and Brett had helped her. This is the origin of Cressida’s warm feelings for him. Thus, Brett progressively gains a central position in Cressida’s affections, and when he comes back from Iraq and breaks the engagement with Juliet, Cressida hopes to see her feelings reciprocated. In other words, she is placing all her hopes for a future happiness and fulfilment upon him. Cressida’s suicidal thoughts in college are the preamble to her real suicide attempt when she is rejected by Brett and follows this previous inclination to kill herself by jumping into the river.

Cressida had tried to adapt the new context of the university to her rules by expecting the teachers to make exceptions for her, but she failed to do so. She needs to revise her habits in order to get used to college, but at this point she does not possess enough critical distance to do so. All these events shatter Cressida’s self-confidence, and demonstrate that the self Cressida showed to the world is mostly

entirely based on other people's perceptions and expectations instead of being shaped by her.

Cressida's last and crucial experience of withdrawal and return is her disappearance after her attempted suicide and her eventual homecoming. Cressida's disappearance could be labeled as an experience of self-loss. She chooses to disappear because she experiences what she considers the ultimate rejection: Brett's refusal to love her. Brett had signed up as a voluntary soldier in the Iraq War in 2001, where he witnessed several atrocities, the most severe being a gang rape committed upon an Iraqi girl by his fellow soldiers. Brett returns home severely wounded and presenting psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>39</sup> He physically and psychologically abuses Juliet, which leads to the breakup of their relationship. At this point, Cressida decides to confess her love, considering that now they have been made equals by his terrible wounds: she tells him that they are both "misfits" and "freaks," which for her is a symbol of uniqueness. Brett, who is not attracted to her at all, deems these adjectives offensive: her arguments are simply incomprehensible and illogical to him. This proves how distant and conflictive their perceptions are, and how misguided Cressida is in hoping that he would love her. Brett recoils from her and Cressida, shocked, feebly strikes at him. He has a disproportionate reaction to this and shoves her against the windowsill of the car, making her nose bleed.

Brett's rejection has a huge impact upon Cressida's feeble self-esteem: it strongly reinforces her feeling that nobody cares for her, and prompts her to abandon her house and family. Brett's rebuff marks the culmination of Cressida's process of questioning her own identity: for

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<sup>39</sup> Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) usually follows exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that includes actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing or learning about an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person. People suffering from PTSD have problems concentrating and remembering things. They experience fear, helplessness, or horror; and tend to suffer guilt, and later this may lead them to depression. Besides, they often relieve of the traumatic event and exhibit heightened state of arousal with a lowered threshold for rage; as well as a numbing of emotional responses and loss of interest in others. This numbing is the often accompanied by a disinterest in sexual relationships or pleasure; social isolation and withdraw from their family attachments (De Zulueta 193-194, 207). This condition accounts for some of Brett's changes such as his rage outbursts, or his rejection of Juliet.

a second time, she is exposed to the idea that she is not as special as she thought (the first time has been at university with the failure of the Frankenstein's project). She does not feel smart at all when she realizes that she had totally misunderstood Brett's feelings toward her. Thus, feeling deprived of all love, and of the previous main identity trait upon which she had constructed her whole self, she surrenders to her depressive feelings and jumps into the Nautauga river.

The basic mistake that Cressida makes when expecting Brett to love her is to think that they are alike: she narcissistically projects her own self-image onto him, believing that he is a "freak" just like her, and that he shall be proud of being socially marginalized and will be willing to share this condition with Cressida. As Oates argued in her talk "Close Encounters with the Other," given at the Key West Literary Seminar in 2012,

there comes a time in our lives when we realize that other people are not projections of ourselves—that we can't really identify with them. We might sympathize or empathize with them, but we can't really know them fully. They are other and they are opaque. (qtd. in Anderson "Review *Beautiful*" 3)

The real problem in this case is that Cressida is not even projecting her true nature upon him, but the one she has been constructing from the perception that others have of her as an independent, clever, and incomparable girl, qualities that she also uses as a shield to hide her insecurities; for the real Cressida would like to be more physically attractive and to have more friends. Cressida is aware of this, believing that she "had no existence, in herself. From earliest childhood she had believed this. Rather she was a reflecting surface reflecting other's perception of her, and love of her" (*Carthage* 378). However, she has been representing this role all her life and does not know how to truly express herself.

After Brett's brutal shove, Cressida starts reflecting about her position in the world, and finding it alarmingly unstable, immediately decides it would be better to die: "*Never the one loved. Never the one adored. Better, then. Better to be carried away in the river like trash,*

and gone” (*Carthage* 304, emphasis in the original). Thus, paradoxically, her most direct effort to find love has resulted into the last stroke on her self-love and the wish to die in order to finish her psychological turmoil, from which she feels there is no other escape.

Suicide has been already introduced in the chapter “Mothers” by resorting to Pritchard (21-24) when analyzing Swan’s death in *Garden*. In *Carthage*, we do not have a suicide but a suicide attempt: Cressida escapes from Brett and jumps into the river, hoping to die; but she survives and is rescued by a woman who nurses her back to health, Haley McSwain. Resorting to Pritchard’s terms, Cressida is indeed experiencing a downhill course in her life: she has problems of self-definition and intimacy with others, and cannot adapt to the university where she has felt so rejected that she has considered suicide for the first time. She has laid her ultimate hopes of finding acceptance in her love for Brett, and Cressida cannot cope with the anguish of his rebuff. In fact, as Pritchard argues, very often, in a suicide predicament, there is a subjective experience of the victim feeling repudiated by those around her/him (e.g., a particular individual, family, community or circumstance), which shatters her/his hold on the value of life (2). This is exactly Cressida’s case: she feels repudiated by her family, her community (represented by her college) and her love-interest Brett.

This is the second time that Cressida considers killing herself and the first time that she actually attempts to do it. Resorting to Pritchard’s postulates (23), we might remark that the first time, Cressida was simply perturbed (that is, greatly disturbed) but she lacked lethality. At the present time, though, she is both disturbed and in a state of lethality, so she jumps into the river to end her life. She also presents intrapsychic factors such as an unbearable psychological pain from which she wishes to flee, something that the suicide would allow her to do. She also presents cognitive constriction because her present mode of thinking can be described as “tunnel vision,” since it focuses only upon her present disturbed state of mind and contemplates death as the only solution, while disregarding any other alternatives. Furthermore, Cressida shows signs of inability to adjust to her real identity, to college, and to being rejected by Brett, and finds difficulties in creating constructive techniques and overcoming personal difficulties possibly



caused by the weakening of her ego due to a trauma: she tends to run away from her problems instead of trying to address them. And finally, her ego has been weakened by the trauma of feeling utterly rejected by those around her.

Cressida has problems forming and maintaining close bonds to others. In this respect, Leenaars makes an interesting point by reminding us that the development of a sense of identity starts in adolescence, and that young adults continue to develop this sense of identity, evolving a finer and more discrete version of who they are in relation to others. The central issue of this period is the demand to master the challenge of intimacy (16). Although the capacity to relate to others emerges earlier, as Kimmel points out, the individual does not become capable of fully intimate relationships until the identity crisis is resolved (qtd. in Leenaars 16). Before this is solved, the individual can only avoid closeness or engage in narcissistic relationships. As Frager and Fadiman note, if one's identity is weak and threatened by intimacy, the individual may turn away from or attack whatever encroaches (qtd. in Leenaars 16). Leenaars adds that in such case, the individual may also attack oneself (16).

At nineteen years old, Cressida is a young adult trying to discover not only who she is, but what her position is as a sister, daughter, friend, and perhaps girlfriend. She faces the question of acquiring intimacy in her relationship with others, but she is ultimately unable to do so because her own identity crisis is not solved. Due to this, Cressida both avoids intimacy and engages in narcissistic relationships, as seen in her avoidance to form meaningful ties with her family and her aggressivity when she feels that they are invading her own space; as well as her domineering, superficial and self-centered friendship with her friend Marcy. Following the theories of Frager and Fadiman, we might remark that Cressida's identity is not only weak but also feels threatened by intimacy: this is part of the reason why she rejects and despises close interactions with her family members. In short, although she has solved neither her inner identity dilemmas nor the question of intimacy, she tries to become attached to Brett, a wish that inevitably ends in disaster.

Another interpersonal trait mentioned by Pritchard (23-24) is rejection-aggression, in which the person suffers an unbearable

narcissistic injury that leads to experience self-blame and to feel hate for others: this is precisely Cressida's case. Finally, a last interpersonal element is identification-egression, which is described as the loss of an ideal; in Cressida's case, the possibility of being loved back by Brett. When this does not take place, Cressida wishes, as Pritchard argues (24), to egress, to cease to exist. With this intention, she jumps into the river, and this results not only in her banishment and subsequent loss for her family, but also in the loss of her previous fake identity. This is one of the crucial episodes of the book, as well a clear example of loss, in this case, the loss associated to a missing person.

Cressida vanishes for several years and is declared "missing." This adjective indicates that she can be conclusively declared neither alive nor death. Her absence thus represents a loss for her family. Furthermore, Cressida, like Marianne Mulvaney, experiences what we have called "self-loss" during the time when she has an itinerant life far away from her family, living under a fake identity and trying to compose her unstable self. In order to analyze these two losses, we shall employ the theoretical framework of Abraham and Torok compiled in the previous chapter, "Fathers." The inclusion of this theory here is justified by the strong position that loss acquires in the book as one of its central themes: Brett's and Cressida's loss of home, the Mayfields loss of Cressida, Cressida's loss of her family, Cressida's loss of her own self, etc.

#### **5.3.4 Loss: Cressida's Disappearance as Self-Loss**

Cressida's personal circumstances at the time of her disappearance are mostly ignored by her family. They suspect that something is wrong with her, but they do not know exactly what it is. As her mother acknowledges, "their daughter's life was a very private one" (*Carthage* 95). The loss occurs then unexpectedly for them, because they do not know anything about Cressida's troubled state of mind.

As it is revealed in the second half of the book, Cressida disappears but she is alive, although her family does not know the truth. By diving into the river and starting a new life Cressida succeeds in getting momentarily away from her identity problems and from all the people that have, in her opinion, disallowed her. She is now free from all these

ties, including the self-image of the smart girl who had become such a draining weight for her. She does not need to live up to that reputation now, but the result is that she cannot find a stable alternative to this identity in her new life. She is literally and figuratively lost.

Badly hurt, Cressida is rescued from the river by Haley McSwaine. Haley is one of the best examples of the corpus of solidarity among female characters. She tenderly nurses Cressida back to health, and she respects her intimacy, since she never presses her to explain what has exactly happened to her. Therefore, Haley does not know that Cressida's family is looking for her: she just presumes that she has no one else in the world.

Cressida reminds Haley of her little sister Sabbath, who died aged seventeen in a car accident. Haley was convinced that one day she would re-encounter Sabbath in the form of another human being, and thinks that Cressida is that person. As a result, Haley offers her to adopt that role, and so Cressida easily assumes a new social identity as Haley's deceased sister, Sabbath Mae McSwain, disregarding her old life. As Haley tells her, "[w]ho you'd been did not matter much of a damn. Only who you would be" (*Carthage* 311). Cressida gladly accepts this transformation: "How grateful Cressida was! *Cressida Mayfield* had become hateful to her, repugnant. How much more beautiful, *Sabbath McSwain*" (*Carthage* 308, emphasis in the original). Ironically, she has forsaken her biological sister Juliet but adopts the role of a stranger's sister. Besides, Cressida has escaped her family's influence upon her identity only to let herself fall under the influence of another person: she is just substituting one model for another one, and keeps on allowing other people to define her.

When Cressida is rescued from the water, she seems to be reborn to a new life but her new self is as illusory as the previous one. By concealing the details of the trauma and the existence of her family and home not only from others, but also from herself, she is failing to introject her losses in Abraham and Torok's terms, and for this reason she cannot live a mentally healthy life: she can only go on performing a new fake role. She does not bring herself to think about the past, about her family, and even about whether Brett might have been charged with her murder or not: "*Know but don't know. Did not wish to know*"

(*Carthage* 336, emphasis in the original). She cannot cope with all these feelings of guilt, so she hides them into her secret intrapsychic tomb. In contrast with the situation in the past, she is now conscious of the artificiality of her new identity, but prefers not to think about it: “*Derailed. In exile. Deeply ashamed, despised. Yet she had so little pride, she was grateful most days simply to be alive*” (*Carthage* 201, emphasis in the original). Her self-esteem is so low at this point that she leaves herself aside and easily assumes the fantasy suggested by Haley of being her sister.

The fact that she does not contact her family derives more from her postponing making a decision than from any conscious choice on her part. She is not reacting or getting control over her life: she lets time elapse without actually considering her family’s situation or reaction. Another reason is her narcissistic tendency to think that all her problems are caused by others, and not herself. She considers that she is never the one to blame: for instance, she considers that she has few friends because she wants to have few friends, not because she treats people with hurtful sarcasm; and she reflects that she has disappeared because her family do not appreciate her.

Cressida then adopts a new erratic life that somehow recalls Marianne Mulvaney’s journey toward self-adjustment, but is much more chaotic: Cressida and Haley live in Miami at various addresses until Cressida starts living alone after Haley moves with her lover Drina. Cressida works in innumerable minimum-wage jobs such as store clerk, kitchen worker, waitress, etc. and does not relate to anybody in a deep manner: “I have no ‘intimate’ life. I am just what I-what I *do*” (*Carthage* 209, emphasis in the original). In Martin et al.’s terms, Cressida is here immersed in the tacit understanding of her everyday routines; in this case as a person who does a series of jobs.

Her true self is still lost at this point, and this is why she defines herself in a sort of performative way not by saying who she is but what she does as a job. This chaos is a sign that Cressida is not really trying to find herself, as Marianne, but is merely running away from her dilemmas and letting them remain undefined and unsolved. Her attempt to reconstruct her identity by becoming Sabbath McSwaine does not bring any solution, though; and in time Cressida realizes that Sabbath

is an empty artificial construction, made “out of fragments, she’d glued and pasted and tacked and taped” (*Carthage* 290) that starts to crumble after some years. Cressida is thus forced to consider confronting who she really is and what she has done. This last step is triggered by a visit to the death row of a prison, while working as the assistant of a professor, which shall open to her the way to a new reflective agency.

This visit triggers an epiphany due to its proximity to a place closely bound to death. It brings back memories of how she almost passed away in the river, and arises as well her awareness of the legal punishment system and the consequences of her disappearance, so that she decides to return home and face her past decisions. Cressida is exerting here interpretative understanding, which begins with a concern about a psychological person’s care for her/his particular being and evolves into an inquiry into the world of experience. In this case, the shock caused by her visit to the prison eventually leads Cressida to further questioning her actions and thus face their consequences for her beloved ones.

She eventually decides to go back home to rectify her mistakes and accept whatever reaction her family might have. Her attitude, more introspective and mature than her previous resentment, promises a more genuine approach to her inner self, and the possibility of learning to healthily deal with intimacy and truly love others, overcoming thus her past traumas.

At this point, it is significant to notice that when Cressida was rescued, she remained silent for a time: “She’d been unable to speak. For a long time mute. [...] she was too sick, gut-sick. Too shamed” (*Carthage* 306). Like Jesse Vogel, she is unable to verbalize her trauma, although she finally tells an incomplete version of the events to professor Hinton, her boss. This is highly significant, since she loves Hinton: it is a sign that she is beginning to trust the people she loves and to reveal her real self to them.

Thus, after visiting the jail, Cressida starts to face what she has really done by verbalizing it and putting it into words such as “betrayal” (*Carthage* 289). This implies the beginning of the process of what Abraham and Torok labelled metaphorization and communication which is essential in any process of introjection. After wondering “if

her behavior had been a primitive sort of revenge for their failure to love her” (*Carthage* 328), she comes ever closer to the genuine roots of her trouble, which eventually leads her to hesitate if it was true that they did not love her; and to perceive that her identity as Sabbath is starting to crumble. It might be considered, resorting to Abraham and Torok, that Cressida’s sensation of being unloved constitutes a fantasy which had trapped her in a fake identity. In fact, that very role can be labelled a fantasy. Performing her role as Sabbath, she was just substituting a new illusory self for an old one, but now she seems to realize that she cannot keep hiding behind these artificial identities and is determined to open her intrapsychic crypt to let her phantoms out. She eventually decides to go back home to rectify her mistakes and accept whatever reaction her family might have. Her attitude promises at least a more genuine approach to her inner self, and the experience of self-love which could eventually help her love others and introject the traumas and losses of her past life.

### **5.3.5 Loss: Cressida’s Disappearance as a Family Loss**

Having explained how Cressida experiences her own loss, we now turn to consider how her family and Brett Kinkaid confront her banishment. Cressida’s body is never found, so the loss causes uncertainty in the family. As far as they know, she is neither alive nor dead. As Harvey asserts, “grief in these situations is daily, debilitating, and open-ending” (283). Cressida’s disappearance prompts the dispersion of the family since the parents get a divorce and eventually all of them abandon their house due to the painful memories it brings. However, Zeno insists upon not selling it, in case Cressida comes back.

Cressida’s parents have divergent ways of facing the loss of their daughter and this eventually causes an irreconcilable conflict between them: they represent two different tendencies: “an inhibitory tendency, which by repression, avoidance, postponement, etc. holds back or limits the reception of disturbing stimuli, and a facilitative or reality-testing tendency, which enhances perception and thought about disturbing stimuli” (Parkes 90). Thus, Zeno avoids considering the prospect of Cressida’s death and final loss, while his wife assumes it from the beginning. Zeno’s interpretation of Arlette’s homages to their daughter

changes from initially considering them touching, then discomfoting, and finally disturbing. He dislikes them because they mean that his wife takes for granted that Cressida is no longer living, that she is forever lost.

Zeno cannot come to terms with the loss of his daughter: “He knew: she was alive. He knew: if he persevered, if he did not despair, he would find her” (*Carthage* 420). He cannot introject her loss, because he makes a mistake when identifying the source of the problem: he refuses to believe that whether she is dead or alive, the fact is that he has lost her. As he cannot put the tragedy into words, he considers that it is obscene to write the dates of her birth and death in a plaque in her honor: “Why do we need those dates? Why does everything have to be dated, finalized?” (*Carthage* 431). This inability to speak of her death proves that he is not introjecting the loss. In the end, Zeno was right when he refused to acknowledge that Cressida was dead, because she was actually alive. However, his attitude showed his inability to assume the loss of his daughter, which was real.

As he cannot mourn his daughter, he erects a secret intrapsychic tomb with her disappearance because he cannot believe that she has vanished from his life: “it had been years. More than six years. He carried it inside him like malignant marrow in his bones” (*Carthage* 454). This is the reason why Zeno insists on keeping the house as well as the gas, electricity and water supplies intact even after all the family has left. The emptiness of the house may be read as a symbol of the void that Cressida has left within her family, both physical (her body cannot be buried) and psychological (her persona has vanished). The house acquires then a double significance for Zeno: it is both the representation of the despair over Cressida’s disappearance and also the hope of her safe return. This demonstrates how someone’s disappearance can be even harder to assume than her/his death, since the uncertainty of the situation gives room to the hope of a reunion, which complicates the assimilation of the loss, while death is indisputably irreversible.

Zeno elaborates an unconscious fantasy, expressed in his long search for Cressida and his flat rejection of his wife’s attitude of honoring Cressida’s life. Like Michael Mulvaney, during this period

Zeno has personal problems, such as his drinking habit, although his problems are not as serious as those of Marianne's father. Unexpectedly, his dream of having his daughter return home safe becomes true, which allows him to abandon his fantasy and his search.

After the tragedy takes place, Arlette is shocked, but she gradually comes to terms with Cressida's loss, that is, she introjects it and achieves thus harmony between herself and her missing daughter. As she says, Cressida "is happier now, knowing that we love her" (*Carthage* 417). Although ironically Cressida is not dead, she is not happier and she does not know that they love her since she has disappeared because she thinks just the opposite, Arlette has been able to imbue meaning to the tragedy in a positive manner and to readjust her mental topography by changing her perspective "through the reinterpretation of the event using positive focus" (Thompson 23). Curiously, Arlette comes to understand Cressida better after her disappearance. She has a more open attitude towards Cressida's personality and possible feelings: "Cressida wasn't a negative person, she was—complex" (*Carthage* 427). It seems that she starts to truly know her at this point, which corroborates to what extent Cressida's presence was paradoxically an obstacle in the process of knowing her and even loving her: her self-affected presence was too obtrusive to allow easy access to herself.

Arlette then decides to honor her daughter's life. Therefore, she shares Cressida's paintings by organizing exhibitions and creates a memorial garden in a park. Thus, she is not stuck in the pain caused by her certainty of her death, but celebrates Cressida's life and achievements. She makes her grieving public, which represents an essential step in the process of introjection of a loss. Religion helps her in this process as a tool to understand the meaning of the loss. In this sense she might be compared to characters such as Marianne Mulvaney. Due to Brett's damaged memory, Arlette doubts, to some extent, his confession. She concludes that Brett is a victim as well, and that God wants them to be together as a family and visits him in prison.

In this manner, Arlette constructs a new life over the tragedy she has endured by looking into the future. When she discovers that she has cancer, she is able to bravely confront the situation, proving "the belief



that one is a stronger person for the [traumatic] experience and is better able to handle the blows that life will inevitably deal” (Updegraff and Taylor 4). After she overcomes the cancer, Arlette starts to have a more active community life. This is extremely helpful for her recovery since “[b]eing invested with goals serves a number of functions related to finding meaning and control” out of a tragedy (Thompson 29). For example, she remains close to the reality of trauma collaborating with battered women’s shelters. This also gives her more control over her life, since she had “rarely made any major decision of her own for nearly three decades” (*Carthage* 442). Her passive attitude is now over.

In sum, Cressida may be dead or alive, but the reality for her family is that she is missing, and so her parents must deal with her loss. Zeno clings to the possibility of her being alive as an excuse to avoid acknowledging her loss, and this is a destructive attitude that ties him to the hope of recovering Cressida, and chains him to the past; whereas Arlette’s attitude is constructive: she admits the loss and takes steps to introject it while at the same time she looks into the future. We may even draw a parallelism between *Carthage* and *Mulvaney’s*: Cressida is alive, but the Cressida that reappears at the end is not the same person that disappeared years ago.

Her identity has been modified through a process that is helping her to discover her true self: Cressida does not come back to enact again the role of the smart, malicious and witty daughter, since now she blatantly admits that she is still trying to find out who she really is. Thus, even if she returns with her family, they are not recovering the same daughter that they have lost. Like Marianne, who lost her family role and identity after her rape, Cressida also experiences a process of self-loss and identity confusion after her attempted suicide, and as a result, her return does not imply that her parents are actually recovering their daughter Cressida, the smart one. Arlette’s attitude toward Cressida’s disappearance suggests that she will be able to assume all these alterations; but Zeno’s adjustment is perhaps not so clear.

Like her mother, Juliet is convinced that her sister is dead. Although she used to be the only churchgoer of the family, she cannot find consolation in religion, and she progressively loses her faith in God, just as her mother’s beliefs become stronger. Juliet’s strategy to

deal with the loss of her sister is “to say very little about it” (*Carthage* 428). Her inability to verbalize the trauma suggests that she has not really dealt with its consequences but simply tried to leave them behind her. She abandons the town to start a new life, repelled as well by the pressure of the media. She moves to Albany, where she gets married and has two children.

However, for Juliet, Cressida’s loss is completely subordinated to the loss of Brett. This is apparently the most serious loss for her and the one that she is unable to assume. Juliet loses Brett twice: first, when he returns from the Iraq War clearly traumatized and Juliet refuses to admit that he is not the same person, that is, she refuses to admit the loss of the former Brett; and second, when he is accused of the death and disappearance of Cressida.

Therefore, Juliet incorporates Brett’s loss, swallowing him up along with the painful memories of his war transformation, which she never really recognized. Even after he returned from the war and started to mistreat her, she hoped that the relationship would survive. Juliet’s “way of coping with the loss of her fiancé was to say nothing about it” (*Carthage* 425): she cannot utter those words because she has swallowed the trauma, and she constructs a secret tomb with Brett’s change and his brutal behavior towards Cressida, as well as her own suffering. She keeps her fantasy of a future life with Brett alive in her mind to the extent that she is unable to adjust her mental topography to the changes which the loss of Brett causes in her life.

In Abraham and Torok’s terms, she never recovers the libidinal energy she had originally placed in Brett and consequently is never able to reinvest it in a new love object. That is why, thinking back on the past, she reflects: “when I was married to my husband it seemed to me a second marriage. The first, that had never occurred yet holds me captive. The second, which did occur but does not prevail in my memory” (*Carthage* 472). As Brett is held captive by the traumatic memory of his experience in Iraq which he can hardly repress, Juliet is a prisoner of her dream of being happily married to him to the extent that the dream seems to have prevailed in her memory and imposed itself over the reality of her marriage. Although Brett’s experience in Iraq was real and Juliet’s just a dream, both keep intruding in the

subjects' lives representing an obstacle for their coming to terms with the present reality.

Therefore, the loss of the Cressida corroborates the loss of Brett for Juliet, who is unable to confront these two losses. Juliet's strategy is simply to leave the past behind, to try to forget it and erase it, something she cannot do, since she is unable to come to terms with her traumas. In fact, Juliet is the only person who does not really welcome Cressida upon her return, although she does not manifest her discomfort outwardly. She considers her morally guilty and believes that she disappeared to take revenge on the family. Her return is a shock to Juliet and it awakens her old traumas, since she cannot forgive Cressida for all the things they have all lost because of her, especially her relationship with Brett which was in fact already finished when Cressida disappeared: "*Brett Kinkaid was my true love. That will not change though I have changed. I will hate [Cressida] forever, for ruining my love*" (*Carthage* 470, emphasis in the original).

Juliet wrongly interprets Cressida's reappearance as the return of the traumatic past she has tried to escape from. However, even if the woman that returns is still her sister, her identity has been modified, it has developed: she is not the same person. But Juliet cannot see this because she closes her eyes to this evidence in the same manner that she tried to close her eyes to the fact that the boy who came back from Iraq was not the same Brett that had gone to war.

Brett Kinkaid returns from the Iraq War in a terrible state, both physically and mentally. He is no longer the kind boy he used to be: now he is unpredictable, nasty, impatient, and prompt to rage and even violence. This alteration affects his acquaintances in different manners. Zeno, for instance, considers him dangerous and is secretly relieved when the engagement with Juliet is broken. Cressida is conscious of Brett's new self: as she admits, "[s]ure he'd been a nice guy—before. [...] now, Kincaid isn't a gut you messed with" (*Carthage* 294, emphasis in the original). Brett himself knows that his life has been completely altered after his return because he is aware of his actions at war but he cannot cope with them and with the person he has become:

He was sick with shame. Sick with guilt. [j] He couldn't  
purge himself. Better to die. To have died—"in combat."

Now it was too late. He'd been killed but hadn't died—exactly. Felt to himself like carelessly made to resemble a human being—a mannequin-mummy. (*Carthage* 145)

He cannot undo what he has done (or, more precisely, what he has not done: trying to prevent a gang rape) and as he did not have the merciful chance of being killed, now he has to face the effects of his deeds on himself. Ironically, instead of being under trial as an accomplice of the gang rape, he was simply questioned, and later honorably discharged and given a Purple Heart, the Iraq war campaign medal. This is why he yearns for retribution.

Brett's mind is so confused that he confesses Cressida's murder because he mixes this event with the crime he witnessed in Iraq, the group rape, torture and burial of a young girl. As a result, in his confession to the police, he seems to be referring to Cressida but is actually describing what he and the other soldiers had done to the Iraqi girl's corpse:

He told them of the shallow grave in which they have laid her—in which he had laid her—covered her with dirt and leaves, with their hands—the butts of their rifles—then it seemed to him this was a mistake for there had been no graves in this rocky soil. (*Carthage* 389)

This confusion, which is probably due not only to his PTSD but also to his remorse and his wish of expiating his lack of assistance to the girl, shows to what extent Brett is traumatized by his experiences at the war: the images of the rape and murder of the Iraqi girl that he tries to avoid by locking them in “a kind of artificial unconscious” (Abraham and Torok 159) keep emerging to the surface of his consciousness and merging with the present circumstances of his life in an uncontrolled way. It is evident that Brett has not been able to readjust his mental topography—to use Abraham and Torok's terms—to adapt it to the changes he has experienced, and for this reason he is lost in a circle of repetitions of the traumatic event.

After Cressida's disappearance, Brett accepts his sentence meekly. His time in jail is for him a path towards redemption, not only for

supposedly killing Cressida, but also for his deeds in Iraq: “To all charges, to any charges brought against him he had pleaded guilty for there was no yearning in the corporal greater than a yearning for expiation” (*Carthage* 388). We might thus assert that his unreal murder of Cressida functions for him as a recreation of his actual silent compliance to a crime in Iraq, and his assumption of guilt and need of atonement for Cressida’s unreal murder recreates his desire to atone for his true actions at war, for which he was never legally punished but simply questioned. In other words, he needs to introject Cressida’s false murder in order to facilitate the introjection of his traumas at Iraq.

Religion comes to support him through this process. Brett had formerly been a Protestant, but in prison he meets a Catholic priest who becomes his friend and to whom he willingly confesses his sins thus verbalizing them and starting the process of introjection. He learns thus to come to terms with his maimed body, and with the fact that he has survived and has to endure his fate. Therefore, his guilt and his pain start to disappear. At the end of the novel, he allows the returned Cressida to visit him in jail, but there is no information in the novel about this encounter.

Having discussed the process of identity formation in *Carthage* and the prominent role of the family in it, we shall now consider *Wonderland*, where Jesse’s identity is seriously affected by the repeated experiences of loss of family figures which he undergoes.

#### **5.4 IDENTITY FORMATION: JESSE AND HIS (SURROGATE) FATHERS IN WONDERLAND**

In Jesse’s case, the influence of his family in the formation of his identity is characterized by lack, absence and abandonment, three concepts which are closely linked to loss. Loss, then, occupies a central position in the identity formation of this character. Jesse receives and absorbs the teachings and behaviors of a series of family figures (basically, father figures), but in all of these cases, the relationships are tinged by an experience of abandonment that deeply marks the character. From his father-models, Jesse inherits a love of exerting control and an excess of ego that compels him to disregard the Other, a tendency most notably reflected in his despise of women. This

propensity makes him increasingly isolated, a sensation that is aggravated by the experiences of family abandonment which he undergoes.

In this section, we shall focus on the family figures whose loss Jesse is forced to assume as a son, that is, his parents and surrogate fathers; but we shall also point to the effects of these experiences on his reaction to the loss of his daughter Shelley. The obsession of this character for swallowing the characteristics of others gives him a vampiric aura, which adds to the Gothic atmosphere that *Wonderland* exhibits.

Jesse's adherence to these characters is invariably followed by their abandonment. Being and feeling deserted is a common episode in this corpus (the case of Richard and Nada from *Expensive* immediately come to mind), but it is nowhere so prominent as in this novel. Jesse's abandonments deeply affect his sense of security and belonging, as well as his sense of self and social identity. The transformations that his identity undergoes are reflected in his change of surnames: he is born as Jesse Harte; after his family's murder he becomes Jesse Vogel; and then turns to Jesse Pedersen after he is legally adopted; finally, as a young adult, he comes back to be Jesse Vogel. The protagonist, then, looks for his own individuality for most of his life, while carrying the burden of the abandonments he suffers. His worst fear is being abandoned due to death, because death is for him the most terrifying of human mysteries. In fact, by becoming a doctor, Jesse aims at avoiding death, that is, at trying to exert control over it, despite knowing that this is an impossible feat:

I want to fix things up [j] I have this dream, this bad dream, of my crossing a room to a patient who turns out to be dead]a nd everything is awful, everything dissolves, because the patient is *dead* and beyond my ability to help himj[ j] I wake up in a real terror. Because if they die, [j] then they have escaped to some place where you can't follow them. (*Wonderland* 222, emphasis in the original)

His dream clearly echoes the time in which he walked into his family house as a teenager to find most of his family murdered. Therefore,

Jesse is unconsciously trying to compensate or atone for his inability to help his biological family from a gruesome death at the hands of his father; just like Brett Kinkaid tried to atone for his lack of interference over the gang rape in Iraq by saving other inmates from being hurt in prison at the hands of others.

Another obstacle in the creation of Jesse's identity is his extremely complex relation to the body, which prevents him from recognizing all the aspects that would constitute not only his self but also his person. That is, according to Martin et al.'s definition, he needs to become an identifiable, embodied, reasoning, and moral agent with self-consciousness and self-understanding, as well as social and psychological identity. He also needs to find his embodied reality by coming to terms with his own physicality (he often denies some of the body's natural instincts); and to assess his reasoning and moral agency by evaluating the extent of his decisions over others, particularly the consequences of his unhealthy perusal of his young daughter. Additionally, when recovering from his biological family massacre, symbolically Jesse will need to learn to use his linguistic skills again. It is only at the end of the novel that Jesse finds the possibility of learning who he really is.

Since Jesse's bond to the body has already been analyzed in the chapter "Parents," the following paragraphs focus exclusively on Jesse's several losses. For this purpose, we will highlight the several parallelisms that Oates's draws between Jesse and Lewis Carroll's character Alice, especially regarding their instinct for survival: they are forced to live a series of frightening and even absurd situations that escape their control, but in the end, they manage to endure the ordeal. As Oates has asserted, "[b]eing a genius does not involve talent but how one behaves in desperation, as seen in Lewis Carroll's Alice" ("Interview Adón" n. p.).

Additionally, some of the themes of Oates's novel are coincident with Carroll's classic: "the underlying themes of Alice's astonishing adventures [...] have to do with Darwinian evolutionary theory and the principle of 'natural selection through survival of the fittest'" (Oates *Lost* 42). Moreover, Alice is for Oates "a model of sanity in a world

gone askew” (*Woman* 91), as Jesse will prove to be as well countless times, when for instance, facing sudden violence.

Jesse is focused upon his own individuality and personal interests. Other people are not too real to him and he does not totally perceive them, or have an authentic empathy with them. This is reflected in his goals, which he summarizes in the following words:

I want to fix people up. Children and everyone. I'd like to run a clinic [j] I want to save them all. [j] I suppose I want to perform miracles [j] And I would like to do this impersonally. Out of sight. I don't especially want to be Dr. Vogel [j] I don't want people to be grateful to me. I'd like to be a presence that is invisible, impersonal. I don't want any personality involved—where there's personality things get confused [j] I imagine myself this way [j] There will be my own family, my wife and children [j] Four or five [children]. This family and me—together. We will understand one another. But the work I do, the patients I see, will be impersonal and without private history, just this abstract love for them—there will be a kind of family to me also, but abstract and impersonal. (*Wonderland* 222)

Oates confirms that Jesse seems to be devoid of personality: “*Wonderland*’s theme [is that] of a protagonist who seems without identity [j] unless deeply involved in meaningful experiences (who is more qualified than a neurologist to determine where the brain and spirit fuse?)” (“Afterword” *Wonderland* 2006, 480). This lack of identity can be founded on the fact that Jesse is constructing his future upon the premises that he has assumed from his father figures. He will have to sort them out and decide where his true agency lies.

Both Alice and Jesse traverse several realms of existence to which they must necessarily adapt. As mentioned in the chapter “Parents,” Friedman (*Joyce* 106) remarks how the landscape alters each time that Alice makes a move across the chessboard of her dream world, and in *Wonderland*, the chessboard is American history from December, 1939 to April 1971: it encompasses the end of the Great Depression, World War II, Kennedy’s assassination, the Vietnam War, the beatniks, the



rise of the importance of scientific technology and the hippie drug culture. Thus, the Great Depression stands for American dislocation and the nihilism of Willard Harte; the American agrarian ideal is reflected in the solipsist Grandpa Vogel; during World War II Jesse is influenced by the megalomaniac Dr. Pedersen; in the 1950s, he is under the influence of the behaviorist Dr. Perrault who is obsessed with science and wants to reduce human beings to machines; and finally, during the 1960s, he comes into contact with nihilism once more. Opposed to empiricism and behaviorism are the theses of Manicheanism whose representative is Monk, and sensualism, embodied in Reva Denk.<sup>40</sup> With every move of the protagonist, history changes, and Jesse must confront those changes before going on. Jesse's confrontation with collective history is a condition of his final awakening into the acceptance of his otherness. Jesse encounters figures who represent certain aspects of American culture as well as heretical philosophical solutions to the problems of existence. The common element that these figures have is that they give priority to their own selves over the world around them (Friedman *Joyce* 98, 106). That is, by witnessing historical events such as Kennedy's assassination, Jesse slowly starts to pay attention to the voices of others, and to the sides of himself that he had previously ignored, such as the body processes.

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<sup>40</sup> Manicheanism, a religious movement founded in Persia in the third century AD by the prophet Mani, is a type of Gnosticism; that is, a dualistic religion that offers salvation through special knowledge or inner illumination (gnosis) of spiritual truth. It considers that life in this world is unbearably painful and radically evil; and that gnosis reveals that the soul, which shares in the nature of God, has fallen into the evil world of matter and must be saved only by means of the spirit or intelligence (nous). This unfolds into three stages: a past period where there is a separation of two radically opposed substances (Spirit and Matter, Good and Evil, Light and Darkness), a middle and present period during which these substances are mixed, and a future period in which the original duality is reestablished ("Manichaenism" n. p.). In fact, Monk, a scientist and later on poet, possesses a dualistic nature, which later on he appears to integrate when becoming a counterculture figure. As Creighton remarks, Monk may be considered Jesse's opposite, who counters Jesse's dedication to life with a death wish (Jesse adulates health while Monk adulates cancer in one of his poems) and, in contrast with Jesse's compulsion for work, abandons his career in medicine (*Joyce* 77). Sensualism, on the other hand, is a metaphysical doctrine concerning the object of our rational cognitions. It asserts that the only actual or existing objects are the objects of the senses. Thus, alleged objects of the pure intellect would be only imaginary ("Sensualism" n. p.). This is what Reva represents for Jesse: the embodiment of the senses and body impulses that Jesse refuses to acknowledge for a long time.

In the following paragraphs we shall provide details of how each of these characters and their respective philosophical views exert an influence over Jesse. As Waller notes, in Jesse's case the struggle for survival compels him to deny the old stage, habits and surroundings, but also to make a conscious attempt to create a new self ("Joyce" 41). This is perceived in the adoption of several names. In the following paragraphs we analyze the abandonments that prompt these alterations in Jesse. This pattern of abandonments begins during Jesse's adolescent years and affects his whole life.

#### **5.4.1 Willard Harte: Family Murder-Suicide**

Jesse's first abandonment is marked by a terribly violent experience: the murder of his Family System of Origin by his biological father Willard Harte, who also tries to kill Jesse and subsequently commits suicide. Jesse will subsequently adopt some characteristics from him.

Willard's reason for committing such a brutal act is to be found in an anguish he does not know how to overcome, prompted by several stressors: the family's economic resources are meager and he has been forced to close their gas station just the day before; the six members of the family live in a small overcrowded house; and the mother, Nancy, is pregnant again. The tension in the house is blatant: all the family is afraid of the air of threat that Willard exudes. Besides, Nancy and Willard often fight, and these episodes seem to turn violent at least on one occasion, when Nancy slaps her husband.

Above all, Willard is moved by his extremely individualistic and selfish attitude: he considers the family as his possession. As mentioned, Friedman considers Willard a nihilist. The article "Nihilism" explains that the term was coined in nineteenth-century Russia. It originally designed a philosophy of moral and epistemological skepticism, and was famously used by Friedrich Nietzsche to describe the disintegration of traditional morality in Western society. In the twentieth century, nihilism refers to a variety of philosophical and aesthetic stances that, in one sense or another, deny the existence of genuine moral truths or values, reject the possibility of knowledge and communication while asserting the ultimate

meaninglessness or purposelessness of life or of the universe (“Nihilism” n. p.). Besides, as Garraty reminds, nihilism was a frequent position among the extremists of the 1960s, who considered that the only way to deal with a “rotten” society was destroying it (868). Willard adheres to this, first, in his unwillingness to communicate with his family. Second, he considers that given the difficult times that his family is going to confront, they are better dead. He does not contemplate any moral conflict when coldly murdering his wife and children, possibly because he considers that life does not have any value or meaning after he has died. This disregard for others and the idea that families are possessions of the father will be inherited by Jesse, who shall grow up to similarly disregard the members of his own family, and to place his priorities and interests before any other concern, as Willard had done. They both come to consider their egos as omnipotent.

The disadvantages the family faces are deeply intermingled with the misery of the times, the Great Depression, which as Oates’s explains, has devastated Jesse’s father (“Afterword” *Wonderland* 2006 481). The exact year is 1939, when that period was coming to an end, but the misery of the decade was by no means over. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had successfully launched the Second New Deal in 1935, and encouraged by the economic improvement, the President cut the relief program in 1937. This had dramatic consequences, such as the fall of stock prices, the raise of unemployment by two million, and the decline in industrial production. The names of the characters from this part of the novel allude to the destitution of the times: the surname “Harte” resembles the German adjective “hart,” meaning “hard;” and Jesse works at a shop called “Harder’s.”

Very possibly, Willard, who had spent most of his youth during the Depression, felt discouraged about the apparently never-ending deprivation of the times. He has experienced failure in a series of unsuccessful business: first, he had tried to raise pigs and chickens in an old farm that belonged to his parents; then he opened a diner on the highway; and later on, he established a lumberyard. None of these ideas prospered. As Friedman notes, these jobs and different homes reflect America’s dislocation during the Great Depression. Willard’s episode conveys a sense of claustrophobia (Friedman *Joyce* 99).

Working men reacted in different ways to unemployment during the Depression: while many of them took the opportunity of being more often at home and reinforce the bond with their families, some others became impatient, refused to help at home, sulked, or turned to drinking. Willard figures among the latter: he is restless, aloof and hostile; and he drinks and roams around the house instead of helping his wife with the children. Willard appears to let his frustration over his many problems mount unhealthily; his state of mind is described as a “baffled blind rage” (*Wonderland* 17). He is described as dominant, and said to remind Jesse of a hunter. Certainly, he will soon become a predator of his own family. Willard’s attitude is related to the difficulties he finds in adequately fulfilling the role of the economic provider for his family. His frustration over this failure leads him to eliminate not only his own role as a father, but also those of his whole family: this is the reason why he commits a murder-suicide, in a clear instance of patriarchal violence that presumes the ownership and total control of the father/husband over the family.

Before the murder, Willard resembles a hostile ghost that menacingly haunts the family in the tradition of classical Gothic novels: he walks outside at night, unable to sleep; and in one particular episode Jesse imagines him suddenly appearing in the kitchen’s window frame

staring in at them [j] He must be hungry, out walking in the woods for so long. His breath coming in puffs of steam. His breath smoking around his mouth. Walking with his head down, bowed, [j] his eyes straining in his sockets to see, to make sure nothing was being kept from him, hidden from him. (*Wonderland* 29)

The quotation also alludes to Willard’s hunger. His son Jesse frequently visualizes him voraciously eating, as if he were a ravenous wolf:

his father’s reddened, muscular face, his cheeks bunched with food, his jaws moving with the effort of grinding up food—chewing, chewing, eating hungrily, eating fast, never getting enough— [j] the cords of his neck standing out strong and hungry. (*Wonderland* 32)

This is one of the most revealing signs of the destructiveness and voraciousness of this character: he is another murderous father from the corpus, possibly the most intimidating one. His appearances in the novel are brief but there is an atmosphere of dread and doom around him; and the effects of his actions will change Jesse's life forever. Hence, at only fourteen years old, Jesse is brutally and suddenly deprived of his primary group of affection when his father destroys the family: suddenly, the boy finds himself without parents, siblings, or even a house. His father has first betrayed him by trying to end his life, and then has abandoned him by committing suicide, finally turning his destructiveness against himself as a consequence of his desperation at the loss of his breadwinner role. Once again, we find a distortion of family roles in the nuclear family due to a character's inability to measure up to the expectations and obligations of his role.

In spite of having been shot by his father, Jesse survives, and while in hospital he exhibits an extremely controlled reaction to the pain and the trauma. Jesse has, unlike Cressida, extraordinary levels of adaptability, even taking into account that his transitions are, in general, much more abrupt and violent than hers: Jesse's most violent transition is related to the mass murder of his family, while Cressida's involves a minor physical attack. Jesse will continue to show this presence of mind throughout the subsequent nightmares he will live through. In this sense, he is similar to Alice, who is "a little girl but has some of the courage and resilience we associate with adults" (Oates "Interview" *Joyce. Conversations 1970-2006*, 159).

#### **5.4.2 Grandpa Vogel: The Reign of Silence**

The second abandonment is committed by Jesse's grandfather, Grandpa Vogel. Grandpa Vogel is the second father figure that Jesse has after his biological father, and the first that he embraces after the murders, when the old man brings Jesse to live with him in his farm. Therefore, at such a young age, he is forced to reshape a personhood and a self which were not completely developed due to his adolescent liminal state. The family group that they form is not a traditional nuclear family, but a family of two members in which the grandfather exerts a parenting function.

As Friedman remarks, Grandpa Vogel, similarly to Carleton Walpole, represents a backwards glance in history to the time when American life was centered on the farm. He embodies the American agrarian ideal by which nature is sufficient provider and companion (*Joyce* 99-100). The remoteness of Grandpa Vogel's farm, along with the contact with the farm animals and nature, bring a certain peace to Jesse. The quiet farm's atmosphere (which seems to reflect the old man's silent disposition) helps Jesse to gain distance from the murders, but also prevents him from dealing with them through verbalization: "Everything was silent here [...] Distance. Silence. Something began to throb in Jesse, deeply and heavily, this thought of their being so far away from the town and from his old home, from what he could remember of himself... [...] He would forget" (*Wonderland* 56). Indeed, he is rather successful at overcoming his past and starting all over again on many occasions; but forgetting does not seem to be such an easy task.

Jesse's forced isolation, a constant motif through the novel, is also present in his relationship with animals, particularly, with horses, his favorite animals. He is impressed by their big eyes that nonetheless see very little, "[a]s if there were very little to see. As if the world contained nothing more than hay, feed, a water trough" (*Wonderland* 61). This is precisely what Jesse is doing at this moment: focusing exclusively upon daily instinctive tasks, not giving much thought to the tragedy he has just lived, or to his previous life. The quietness of the life that Jesse lives at the farm is forever altered when he shows interest for his biological family again, as we shall see. The horse's limited sight also appears as a premonition of the narrow vision of the otherwise highly intelligent Jesse: in the future he shall be so focused upon his life goals that he will miss much of what is happening around him, such as the reasons for his daughter Shelley's flight from him. The horses, then, highlight Jesse's seclusion: he feeds and caresses them and yet he feels "their separation from him, their isolation. He could not cross over into it. [j] There was nothing in *him* [j] that could touch them" (*Wonderland* 61, emphasis in the original). This seems to foreshadow Jesse's future disconnection to others.

Grandpa Vogel exhibits a great emotional detachment toward Jesse. They barely talk, and yet Jesse feels that they are nonetheless united, and leaving the past behind together: “Jesse felt that they were together in their silence, flowing the same way with the passage of each day, time itself a tangible element that carried them forward always forward, away from the past” (*Wonderland* 60). Silence assumes a symbolic nature in here, and Jesse will reproduce this silence by never discussing the Harte murders with anyone. As Grant remarks, silence can also be a form of bonding with others, because words are also given shape in silence; that is, a deeper communication can take place in silence at times. In *Shuddering*, for instance, Karen and Shar share long intimate periods of silence (114). This is what Jesse perceives: he thinks that he is constructing a quiet and comfortable rapport with his grandfather; but the old man has the opposite perception.

Grandpa Vogel exhibits the “masculine silence” alluded to in *them*. His quietness hides feelings of reserve, rage and resentment; but it is also partly due to the quarrels and misunderstandings that the old man had with his son-in-law Willard, whom he never liked, and by extension, with his daughter Nancy and their children. Grandpa Vogel and Willard stand in stark contrast: whereas Grandpa Vogel is introverted and avoids the company of others; Willard is described as extremely talkative and in need of other people “to complete him” (*Wonderland* 59). This latter feature recalls Jesse’s need for role models. Jesse, despite being aware of the family disputes, does not perceive Grandpa Vogel’s resentment. On the contrary, he feels linked to his grandfather and admires him. He even starts to imitate Grandpa Vogel not only in his silent mood, but also by working hard, which serves him as a distraction from his gloomy memories. Unlike his late wife, Grandpa Vogel had never interacted much with his grandchildren: when they came to visit, he was all the time working the fields.

Besides, the tiredness derived from the farm work guarantees Jesse a deep slumber that has healing properties. Jesse will work extremely hard for the rest of his life, as he foresees: “so [...] the rest of his life would pass. Sleep, waking, work; sleep, waking, work. [...] he would not have to think about his life because it would pass like this, one day after another, carrying him forward” (*Wonderland* 64). He is thus

dealing with the trauma by imitating his grandfather's detachment and his hard working. Imitation is in fact one of the manners in which young children learn certain behaviors, as we shall see.

In order to deal with his traumas, Jesse employs a very particular strategy: despite being at the end of middle adolescence, he symbolically regresses to an early developmental phase by adopting the characteristics of a little child who is still discovering the world. This may be interpreted as an overcompensation for his being practically alone in the world. His strategy covers two main areas: first, he embraces the infant learning behavior of imitation by copying his grandfather's and his subsequent father figures' lifestyles; and second, he seems to be ready to start the process of language learning again, while he changes families and environments in the following years, he will reflect the phases of children's language acquisition by advancing from silence to a certain (but not completely successful) verbalization of his trauma. We shall label this process as "language re-acquisition." Something similar occurs in *Do with Me*: after Elena is rescued from her father, she loses the capacity of speech for a while. When she starts talking again, she gets some words confused. She needs to learn to speak correctly again, which stands as a symbol of the end of the fugitive life with her father and of her subsequent integration into society.

In order to understand Jesse's development at this stage of his life in terms of his linguistic evolution, it is useful to recall that there are diverse theories as to how language is acquired. As Crystal has summarized, behaviorist accounts of children language acquisition argue that this process is based on imitation and reinforcement: children learn to speak by copying the noise-patterns around them and through stimulus and response, trial and error, reinforcement and reward, they refine their own language until it matches the language of adults.

Chomsky and others, working from the perspective of generative grammar, oppose this view by providing two basic arguments against it. First, if imitation were the governing principle, children would produce rather different patterns in their language than they actually do. Second, they should not produce some patterns that they in fact produce. For instance, imitation does not explain why children use the



so-called analogies, such as “I goed” or “mouses” instead of “I went” and “mice,” because they have not picked those patterns from any adult. Chomsky and others argued that children are born with an innate capacity for grammar development. This was called the “Language Acquisition Device” (LAD). The device is a hypothesis about the structures of language which are progressively used as the child matures. This theory has been employed to explain those facts that imitation theories cannot explain. In short, both maturation and imitation are essential to develop language.

The Genevan psychologist Jean Piaget argues that language must be viewed in the context of the child’s cognitive development as a whole. Therefore, linguistic structures will emerge only if the intellectual and other psychological preconditions are right (Crystal 29-32). Pinker summarizes this by arguing that language acquisition cannot be explained as merely a kind of imitation, but nonetheless, the experience of acquiring language must include the speech of other human beings. When, occasionally, some parents have raised their children silently in dark rooms, these children have remained mute. The innate grammatical abilities we have, whatever they are, are too schematic to generate speech, words and grammatical constructions on their own. Therefore, babies have to listen to themselves to know how to use their articulators, and have to listen to their elders to learn communal phonemes, words, and phrase orders (45, 277, 288). Oates herself has emphasized the relevance of this imitative process: “As children, we acquire a talismanic power by imitating the speech of our elders; what begins as mimesis evolves into what we realize, one day, glancing about ourselves in wonder, is—what? Life itself?” (*Faith* 37-38).

Imitation is not the only principle at work for Jesse, but its influence is undeniable. The initial phase of Jesse’s language re-acquisition starts with the silence with which Grandpa Vogel infuses Jesse: he does not give him a special linguistic treatment in account off his trauma, that is, he does not allude to it. Jesse feels comfortable with this, since he needs a respite from the horror he has just lived. Therefore, at this point Jesse barely has an adult language input, and he does not hear himself speak too often. This phase of muteness needs to be

overcome in order to learn to talk again, that is, to learn to verbalize the trauma.

One day, Grandpa Vogel unexpectedly breaks that silence, alluding to the murder-suicide in blunt and tactless terms that deeply wound Jesse. This episode starts when Jesse expresses his wish to see his family's furniture and belongings, which are locked up in a barn. This demonstrates that Jesse still feels connected with his past and needs a more explicit closure act, but grandpa Vogel does not understand this need, or approve of it, just as he did not approve of his daughter's marriage to Willard Harte.

As Friedman argues, Jesse yearns for evidence of his own history, represented by the furniture, but his grandfather refuses to help him to come to terms with his past. For the solipsist, this is a violation of the terms of existence (*Joyce* 100). As the article "Solipsism" explains, this concept refers, in philosophy, to an extreme form of subjective idealism that denies that the human mind has any ground for believing in the existence of anything but itself. The solipsistic view has been summarized by the British idealist F. H. Bradley in the following terms: "I cannot transcend experience, and experience must be my experience." From this follows that nothing beyond one's own self exists. It has been presented as a solution to the problem of explaining human knowledge of the external world, and generally regarded as a reduction ad absurdum ("reduction to absurdity") ("Solipsism" n. p.). Grandpa Vogel, in Friedman's opinion, is only interested in his particular relationship with the land: he does not want to worry about the consequences of his son-in-law's actions and Jesse disturbs his unconcerned and detached lifestyle by asking him to open the barn and thus relive the events (*Joyce* 100).

He thus refuses to open the barn, as if by keeping those objects under lock and out of view he could erase the very memory of his daughter's marriage. When Jesse insists on opening the barn, his grandfather angrily tells him that he is like his mother:

You're like *her* [j] just like *her*! You don't let trouble alone, you hunt it out! All right, go after it, marry it, lay down with it, but when you get up again all filthy don't come to me—you get what you deserve. Don't come to me

for help, any of you! (*Wonderland* 67-68, emphasis in the original)

Grandpa Vogel also reveals that he had not wanted to take care of Jesse because he is a tired old man, and complains about the high costs of the hospital. Jesse is shocked by these admissions; by the fact that “[f]or months there had been a silence into which certain events existed, stark and invisible, and now the silence had been dirtied by words” (*Wonderland* 68); and particularly, by his grandfather’s breaking of the “partnership of silence” (*Wonderland* 69) that Jesse had misunderstood as mutual understanding.

Grandpa Vogel’s harsh words, despite not being the healing words that Jesse needed to hear, represent Jesse’s re-immersion into language. His grandfather has brought those unnamed events into light, even if it was not in the most delicate terms, and this is the first step toward recovery. Nonetheless, Jesse, understandingly shocked and offended, interprets Grandpa Vogel’s words as a disloyalty: “He had loved his grandfather and his grandfather had betrayed him” (*Wonderland* 71). This silence may then be described as deceptive, since it was filled with repressed words. Therefore, it was not a real silence but an incomplete one.

After fighting with his grandfather, Jesse goes back to his old house to renew contact with his roots and he tells himself that he is a survivor. Since he is deprived of his Family System of Origin, his old house, and the bond with his grandfather, he considers that simply being alive is reason to rejoice. Oates’s homeless characters, Friedman argues, are reduced to seeing mere survival as a triumph (*Joyce* 100). Afterwards, Jesse leaves the farm; but despite the fact that he is the one who decides to leave, his grandfather embodies his second abandonment, since Jesse feels that the old man has forsaken him with his betrayal.

#### **5.4.3 Jesse’s Aunt and Uncle: A Garrulous World**

Jesse’s third abandonment occurs when he goes to live with his uncle, aunt and cousin Fritz in Yewville after leaving his grandfather’s house. The fact that the aunt’s and uncle’s names are never revealed probably indicates that they do not have a major influence in Jesse’s

development, despite their good intentions. However, they represent a major step in Jesse's language re-acquisition phase.

This family tries very hard to cope with the delicate situation by being nice to Jesse and talking all the time, as if they were trying to fill the gap left by the murders with words. Fritz, who shares his room with Jesse, "would try to talk to him in the dark, a questioning, brotherly, gentle murmur punctuating the chilly dark of the room" (*Wonderland* 73). In this manner, they continue to give Jesse language input, although they do not bring up the traumatic murder-suicide, and so it remains unarticulated. His relatives try to fill Jesse's life with an amount of words that appears to be excessive and superfluous because it does not help him verbalize his trauma. They are just filling the void left by the tragedy with banal words. Grandpa Vogel's silence did not bring any solution, but neither does the aunt and uncle's verbosity.

It is plain that Jesse needs to find a balance between these two ineffective approaches, and most importantly, his own language: he spends most of his life attempting to do so. The only language that Jesse masters as an adult is that of science, but that is not enough. He needs a language for his emotions, his past, his memory; a language that is not a monologue or an imposition to others but one featured by communication, one that enriches and enhances the limits of his world. But Jesse finds this quite challenging.

These communicative efforts constitute the second phase of Jesse's language re-acquisition, since they are reminiscent of the language used by caretakers, known as "caretaker speech," "motherese" or "fatherese," according to Crystal. Parents do not talk to children in the same way they talk to other adults; they adapt the language to give the children the maximum opportunity to interact and learn. In early periods, for instance, there is great simplification of sentence structure, a high use of question forms, words and sentences are frequently repeated, speech is lower and livelier, and special words and sounds are used, for instance, diminutives (33). In this case, the aunt and uncle use a special kind of language in front of Jesse. For instance, his aunt reprimands her son Fritz for slamming the fridge's door:

"Fritz, were you born in a barn? Don't you have any manners?" Fritz looked at her, baffled. It occurred to Jesse

that she was saying words she had never said before, before Jesse's coming to live here. She was speaking in a voice, staring at her son in a way that Jesse himself had caused. (*Wonderland* 74)

Jesse notices their discomfort even in these small details; he distinctly perceives "how he altered their lives, stirring the air of any room he entered" (*Wonderland* 74).

Jesse absorbs this new linguistic environment but nevertheless barely reacts to these conversations: he just nods to everything and feels "on the verge of perpetual sleep" (*Wonderland* 73). Despite this, the language production process has begun. This is comparable to the taking off of language in children, which appears at around eighteen months. Vocabulary growth jumps to the new-word-every-two-hours minimum rate that the child will keep until adolescence, and syntax begins as well. Even before they can put two words together, babies can understand a sentence using its syntax (Pinker 267-268). Similarly, Jesse does not talk much but perceives and listens to everything around him.

This family is truly kind to him but cannot deal with the emotional strain of the situation. Finally, with much regret, they take him to an orphanage. This constitutes Jesse's third abandonment, even if he understands their decision: "It was all right, he knew he had to leave, he couldn't live with them. He would not hold it against them" (*Wonderland* 75). And indeed, he does not grow resentful of them. While he is in the orphanage, Jesse starts to reawaken from his lethargic condition and begins to reassert his own person and self. He is resentful of being just a name among the other boys: "He hated the Jesse Harte who lived here, who was in the files here, in someone's manila folder. [...] His name, 'Jesse,' was not a word he acknowledged there. They might call him anything and he would not acknowledge it" (*Wonderland* 81). Here, Jesse is questioning his persona and social identity and refusing to be just an ordinary schoolboy. This is probably the beginning of his quest for reaffirming the individual traits that compose his person.

#### 5.4.4 Dr. Pedersen: The Word of the Father and Homeostasis

When Jesse is adopted by Dr. Karl Pedersen, he legally becomes Jesse Pedersen. In time, his adoptive father will represent his fourth abandonment. Unlike Jesse for most of his life, Dr. Pedersen's person and social identity are perfectly defined by himself: "I am first of all a scientist, and then a physician, and then a father, and then a member of the American community. [...] I am a citizen of the world and of the twentieth century" (*Wonderland* 85-86). Dr. Pedersen is totally devoted to his job, which he significantly puts before his family, and wants Jesse to follow his steps. Jesse had showed interest for the medical profession during his stay in hospital, but Dr. Pedersen is the one who gives him the idea of pursuing this career by telling him: "I believe that there is something in you, a certain destiny, a certain fate..." (*Wonderland* 86) and "[a]lready you are pushing into the person you will be, the future belongs to both of us" (*Wonderland* 88). Dr. Pedersen will be the one to shape Jesse's destiny by urging him to become a doctor and inherit his clinic; and at the same time, he wants to share the merit for his possible future success.

In time, Jesse acquires not only Dr. Pedersen's profession, but also his approach to it: both have a powerful ambition to save every one of their patients. Dr. Pedersen believes that he has received this talent from God: "I am a diagnostician by instinct. I cannot explain my talent except in terms of its being a unique gift that has never failed me. Never. My talent is God-given [j] I am a humble man. I only want to help mankind" (*Wonderland* 86). Apart from his immense ego (which he hilariously denies to possess), this quotation reveals that he feels like a messianic figure, sent by God to save the whole mankind. In Friedman's words, Dr. Pedersen is an overreacher obsessed with attaining perfection. Jesse adheres to the teachings of Dr. Pedersen, but does not totally submit to his philosophy: there is still something in him that responds to other people's helplessness, as seen when he helps Mrs. Pedersen (*Joyce* 101, 104).

Dr. Pedersen adopts Jesse because he feels that his family is incomplete as they do not match his ambitions of perfection. Just like Jesse in the future, Karl Pedersen is obsessed with his Desired Family System: he demands that his family reaches the goals that he has settled

for them and acts exclusively according to his wishes. Dr. Pedersen, then, expects Jesse to amend all these inconveniences, and so he urges him to follow his example in order to become a remarkable man: “To be higher, a higher man, that is not an easy fate. And I believe you will share this fate with me [...] Once you become the man you are, Jesse, you cannot ever rest, but must prove yourself continually” (*Wonderland* 118). These words reveal Dr. Pedersen’s extraordinary narcissism and arrogance, but at the same time, they give Jesse strength to carry on.

In this respect, Dr. Pedersen is a voracious parent who manipulates his children into following his will, shaping them to fit his enormous ambition. He is similar to Ardis from *Do with Me*, who transforms her daughter Elena into a beautiful doll-like submissive woman before marrying her off to a wealthy man. But Elena appears to be much more conscious of this parental control than Jesse: when she sees a nurse, she reflects that she could have been a nurse if her mother had so chosen. Ardis is a strong-willed woman who refuses to be defined by anybody, especially men: “We’re our own ideas, we make ourselves up; some women let men make them up, invent them, fall in love with them, they’re helpless to invent themselves] – but not me, I’m nobody’s idea but my own” (*Do with Me* 79). Ironically, she will force her daughter to do precisely this: look at herself through the eyes of men, being given value exclusively by means of their glance. Therefore, Ardis is the one who “creates” Elena and controls her destiny, first by turning her into a model and then by marrying her off to a much older man, a wealthy and famous lawyer called Martin Howe. As a result, Elena is constantly compared to a doll, and told what to do, what to wear, where to go (significantly, she cannot drive); first by Ardis and then by Martin. The rest of the characters constantly tell Elena that she understands nothing and perceives nothing. Indeed, at times Elena behaves as in a dream, following the pattern someone else has drawn for her. But eventually she gets tired of “the externality of her being she saw through other people” (*Do with Me* 389), and she takes her own life into her hands, a change that is originally motivated by the liberating experience of taking a lover and enjoying sex for the first time (she had felt nothing while having intimate relationships with her husband). Elena finally

decides to abandon her authoritarian husband; but on her own, not in order to live with her lover.

In *Wonderland*, Karl Pedersen, soon becomes the most influential figure on Jesse's life as his father: "other people were not very real; there was no time to think of them, to invest them with reality. Dr. Pedersen's voice was real. It was close, intimate" (*Wonderland* 112). This quote confirms Jesse's tendency to idealize certain figures, as well as his disregard for most people, who become invisible to him. Dr. Pedersen gives him hope too: "You will grow beyond that, that terror" (*Wonderland* 88), he tells him, referring to the murders. He is the first and only person to honestly verbalize Jesse's trauma, breaking thus the silence and taboo around it. The verbalization of traumatic experiences is an essential step to recover, as Oates asserted when accepting the 1969 National Book Award for *them*: "The use of language is all we have to pit against death and silence" (qtd. in Birkerts). Indeed, Dr. Pedersen is explicitly depicted by Jesse as a meaningful voice which stands in sharp contrast to the silence of Grandpa Vogel, or even the aunt and uncle's superficial chatter:

That voice. It was with him everywhere [j] he heard Dr. Pedersen's voice pronouncing his name. *Jesse. Jesse.* The voice seemed to call him back from a deep, dangerous emptiness [j] It was loving, stern, watchful. [j] Sometimes when he studied [...], he heard the words of his books pronounced in his head in Dr. Pedersen's voice, so that he would not forget anything he read. It became permanent once it was heard in Dr. Pedersen's voice. It became sacred. (*Wonderland* 110-111, emphasis in the original)

Dr. Pedersen is, first, the voice of authority here, which follows Jesse everywhere as if he were a kind of omnipresent incorporeal god. In this respect, the power of his voice stands in sharp contrast with the frustrated silence of Grandpa Vogel. Second, Dr. Pedersen is a reassuring, protective and soothing presence in Jesse's life: he liberates him from the horror of his memories without obviating the murders, as his previous custodians had done. Dr. Pedersen has put an end to the



silence that dominated Jesse's life. This has two main effects: first, he has helped him to recover, to a certain degree, from the murders, and second, by showing his appreciation for Jesse, he has increased his self-esteem and provided him with an aim in life. These events represent the third and last phase of Jesse's language re-acquisition, which corresponds to the bloom of language into fluent grammatical conversation at an extremely fast pace, which occurs between late twos and early threes. Children's sentences become longer and more complex, and children are able to embed one constituent inside another. The errors children make are scarce (Pinker 269, 271, 273).

Dr. Pedersen's shaping of Jesse is perceived in every aspect of his life. First, he imbues into him a love for washing thoroughly, an obsession that originates in his medical profession and his awareness of infections and germs, and that he passes onto his stepson, who starts to understand "how the invisible world of germs ruled the visible world, and how it was necessary to control them as much as possible" (*Wonderland* 98-99). On a metaphorical level, constant washing could be interpreted as Jesse's recurrent "cleaning" or erasing of his own past and starting anew. Additionally, it may be a symbol of his detachment from the body: obsessively cleaning his body represents a wish to deny the uncontrollable mechanisms of the body, such as the involuntary production of fluids like sweat. In other words, he wants to keep himself pure, aseptic, detached from others as well as the world. Jesse tries to transmit this cleansing mania into his daughter Shelley, in this case not only to control her body, but possibly out of a wish to make her stay chaste too. Second, Dr. Pedersen's morbid attraction toward "the freakish, the grotesque, and the monstrous" (Showalter "Quartet" xxiii) will be reproduced by Jesse too. The interest in bizarre topics is a common characteristic of the Gothic genre, to which *Wonderland* can be associated. Dr. Pedersen collects gruesome newspaper clips in an album, and in time, Jesse will also keep a similar book. Third, Dr. Pedersen also demands Jesse to talk into complete sentences without omitting subjects or auxiliary verbs, something that, as an adult, Jesse will force his daughter Shelley to do as well. This demand is extremely significant, since it symbolizes that Jesse has finally learned to speak

into complex sentences, marking the culmination of his process of language acquisition.

Jesse's entrance into language as speech regulated by means of specific grammatical rules with the help of Dr. Pedersen can also be perceived in feminist terms by referring to Kristeva's theories about the signifying process, already introduced in the chapter "Mothers." Specifically, this stage can be associated to Kristeva's symbolic phase, which is interrelated with the other semiotic phase.

The symbolic is related with the Freudo-Lacanian notion of post-Oedipal relations, with the function of representation, and with language as a sign-system (Chanter "Revolution" n. p.). For Kristeva, the symbolic is a realm of positions (98). According to Chanter, Kristeva counterposes the symbolic to the semiotic by interpreting the father of the Oedipal drama in terms of language. Since the semiotic chora has maternal connotations, there is a sense in which the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic is sexually marked (Chanter "Psychoanalysis" n. p.). This is the realm of the Father, of patriarchal power by excellence, into which Jesse has just gained access with the assistance of his stepfather.

Besides, as Oliver highlights, the symbolic element of signification is associated with the grammar and structure of signification into which Jesse has just entered: Dr. Pedersen encourages him to speak in complete sentences. The symbolic element is what makes reference possible: words have referential meaning because of the symbolic structure of language. Moreover, we could say that words give life meaning (nonreferential meaning) because of their semiotic content. Without the symbolic, all signification would be babble or delirium; and without the semiotic, all signification would be empty. Ultimately, signification requires both the semiotic and the symbolic. Kristeva proposes that there is a maternal regulation or law which prefigures the paternal law which Freudian psychoanalysts have maintained is necessary for signification (n. p.).

Finally, Dr. Pedersen is the one to introduce Jesse to the theory of homeostasis, one of the central themes of the novel, whose origins Jesse learns by heart and recites to his stepfather:

Hippocrates believed that disease could be cured by natural powers within the living organism. He believed that there is an active opposition to abnormality as soon as the condition begins. In 1877, the German psychologist, Pfluger, said that the cause of every need of a living being is also the cause of the satisfaction of the need. The Belgian psychologist, Fredericq, said in 1885 that the living being is an agency of such sort that each disturbing influence induces itself the calling forth of compensatory activity to neutralize or repair the disturbance. The higher in the scale of living beings, the more perfect and the more complicated the regulatory agencies become. They tend to free the organism completely from the unfavorable influences and changes occurring in the environment. In *The Wisdom of the Body*, the American psychologist, Walter Cannon, quotes the French psychologist Charles Richet: *The living being is stable. It must be so in order not to be destroyed, dissolved, or disintegrated by the colossal forces, often adverse, which surround it. By an apparent contradiction it maintains its stability only if it is excitable and capable of modifying itself according to external stimuli and adjusting its response to the stimulation. It is stable because it is modifiable—the slight instability is the necessary condition for the true stability of the organism.* (*Wonderland*, 115-116 emphasis in the original)

Dr. Pedersen is fond of the ideas of homeostasis because he enjoys the feelings of balance, serenity and control; and he imbues this attachment into Jesse. However, as Friedman notes, Dr. Pedersen's life is ironically full of disequilibrium, especially noticeable in his excessive eating habits (*Joyce* 102). This incapacity to find balance, or to adapt and introject a change, is related to the rigidity that he infuses over his life and in the lives of his relatives. The corpus constantly features the inflexibility of family roles leading to a series of disturbances. In Dr. Pedersen's case, the high expectations that he imposes on his family distort the relationships among them, as well as each individual's identity.

In the end, Daly argues, the homeostasis of the Pedersens is ultimately violent, but they live according to this model: they are controlled by the “head” of the family, Dr. Pedersen. As Jesse learns these theories, he also acquires Dr. Pedersen’s desire for control and his contempt for women. Then, through Jesse’s obsession with the theories of homeostasis, Oates examines the discourses that have shaped American society; a culture that claims to be democratic but that has silenced many voices. Thus, Jesse remains deaf to the voices of others and other realities (of music, poetry, children, women, memory, the body instincts and uncontrollable body realities); while Oates was struggling to achieve a harmony in her writing that did not censor such voices. Her revision of the novel insists, therefore, on a democratic chorus of voices instead of a single one, monologic consciousness (Daly 49, 67).

Bakhtin emphasizes that it is crucial for discourses to enter in a dialogue to others, which is precisely what Jesse is utterly unable to do:

Only through such an inner dialogic orientation can my discourse find itself in intimate contact with someone else’s discourse, and yet at the same time not fuse with it, not swallow it up, not dissolve in itself the other’s power to mean; that is, only thus can retain fully its independence as discourse. (Bakhtin et al. 94)

Even if Jesse could have heard these voices, he does not possess appropriate skills for accepting them in an enriching manner. He is effectively absorbed by the discourses of others, but he cannot integrate them in something that can be called his own discourse. He simply adopts and copies these alien discourses as his, and later on, he will impose this acquired discourse on others, especially his family, in an evident monological fashion. In Bakhtin’s words, a doubled-voice discourse is also possible in a language system that is hermetic, unitary and pure (monologic); but in these systems there is not an appropriate soil to nourish the development of such discourses in a meaningful or essential manner (325). That is, a merely passive and receptive understanding of the speaker’s intention

contributes nothing new to the world under consideration, only mirroring it, seeking, at its most ambitious, merely the full reproduction of that which is already given in the world [j] such an understanding never goes beyond the boundaries of the word's context and in no way enriches the word. (Bakhtin et al. 281)

Thus, this particular speaker could introduce nothing new in his discourse (Bakhtin et al. 281): this is the case of Jesse, who only vampirizes traits and beliefs from others, giving the impression of being dispossessed of personality.

In Bender's opinion, *Wonderland* illustrates a rather dark view of homeostasis. In *The Politics of Experience*, R. D. Laing sees homeostasis as a covert life-denying truce negotiated within the family circle:

The "protection" that such a family offers its members seems to be based on several preconditions: (i) a fantasy of the external world as extraordinarily dangerous; (ii) the negotiation of terror inside the nexus at this external danger. The "work" of the nexus is the generation of this terror. This work is violence. The stability of the nexus is the product of terror generated by its members. [j] Such family "homeostasis" is the product of reciprocities mediated under the statues of violence and terror. (qtd. in Bender 55)

This is precisely what we found in *Wonderland*: Dr. Pedersen instills in his family the idea that the world outside the family is dangerous: as he proves by showing them his collection of gory and gruesome newspaper clips. Ironically, violence is not found outside the family circle, but introduced at the hands of the father/husband Dr. Pedersen by means of his psychological abuse of his wife.

According to Bender, Oates's homeostasis acquires a negative status in *Wonderland*, where it masks a deadly fight between woman and man, and parent and child, which is still far from the Jungian integration of opposites. According to Oates, "wherever one encounters the Aristotelian-Freudian ideal of homeostasis, in opposition to the

oriental or Jungian ideals of integration of opposites, one is likely to encounter a secret detestation of the feminine” (qtd. in 55). In fact, Oates is concerned about such polarization.

Carl Jung’s integration of opposites, of which Oates is fond, is based on his theories about opposites, that is, contrary dimensions that hold tension among them. The greater tension that opposites have between them, the greater their energy; and if there is not any tension, there is not any energy. There are many examples of opposites: progression (which moves forward) and regression (which moves backward); consciousness and unconsciousness; extroversion and introversion; thought and feelings, etc. The libido (a concept which does not necessarily have sexual overtones, but refers to any wish, anxiety or urge) flows between opposites as well. Jung also believed that life was organized around fundamental oppositions, because life is an energetic process that needs opposites. Opposites have a regulatory function: when they reach a certain extreme, they start to move onto the contrary. For instance, an attitude may be gradually taken to the extreme to then turn into its contrary: a violent rage turns into calm; or love turns into hatred (Fordham 20, Douglas 63). Therefore, Jung’s “complexio oppositorum” or “coniunctio oppositorum” is the search of self-fulfillment by a process of continuous psychological integration in the framework of a basically irreconcilable conflict (Frattarolli 257).

Certainly, in *Wonderland*, we do not see such Jungian integration but a constant tension of mutually incomprehensible and unsympathetic tendencies. For instance, there is a barely concealed mistrust for women on the part of men, and for men on the part of women. Perhaps, misogyny is more prevalent given that the main point of view is that of a man, Jesse, whose contempt for women is recurrently portrayed. There is also an unsolved opposition between caregivers and children, with Willard Harte, Grandpa Vogel, Dr. Pedersen and an adult Jesse pursuing and accosting their children, who need to flee from them. Some other opposites presented as irreconcilable are art and science (represented by Monk and Jesse, respectively) and, from Jesse’s perspective, mind and body, basically seen in his problems with physicality. There is little effort on the part of characters to reconcile these opposites for most of the novel.

In sum, Jesse assimilates his stepfather's teachings so flawlessly that he seems to vampirize Dr. Pedersen's dreams as if they were his own: he shall try to dominate his family and to obtain his ideal Desired Family System; and he will open his own private health clinic, just like his adoptive father did. As Jesse's future wife Helene explains, "[h]e is a jumble of men] There are many people inside him [j] And he wants more. He wants his daughters, and he wants me] I mean he wants us in him] He wants to be us. I can't explain. He wants to own us, to be us" (*Wonderland* 445). This accounts for Jesse's voracity and his need for control, represented by the assimilation that Helene alludes to. Additionally, this vampiric trait fits into the novel's inclination for describing monsters, which is yet another clue to its Gothic atmosphere.

On the level of identity formation, Jesse's activities while living with the Pedersens are not the result of his own agency, but of his stepfather's, even if Jesse willingly accepts them. In time, he adopts these traits for himself, as well as the traits of all his role-models, as if they were the object of his own deliberation. Only at the end of the novel is he able to start to discern the magnitude of his massive assimilation.

His adoptive family provides him with a new position in the world and a renewed sense of self:

Now he was never alone. [j] He was not Jesse, but *Jesse Pedersen*. [...] Jesse could not remember clearly now what his life had been in the past. He had been alone, often. [...] That boy had died, perhaps. [j] Or, if he existed anywhere, it was on Grandpa Vogel's farm, out in the deep, vast, silent country, the country where language itself had yet to be created, a world of grunts and nudgings and sorrow, too much sorrow. [...] And Grandfather Vogel: he still existed, out there, in the same world. But his power had been taken from him. He did not count. He was remote and silent and forgotten. (*Wonderland* 92, emphasis in the original)

Jesse has left his grandfather in the realm of his stubborn silence in order to enter the adult mature world of words, although he will retain

that silence to a certain extent by never telling anyone about his family's murder.

Jesse, then, realizes what belonging to a family really implies:

A *family*! For a moment he could not remember what a real family was. The terror grew, a terror at being excluded from the family of men, jostled about on the streets by people in a hurry, people in crowds, with their own families back home, private lives that excluded him permanently] (*Wonderland* 184, emphasis in the original)

He notices the social and private nature of families, and is terrified of being excluded from his new family. Exclusion will become a crucial concept for him, to whom the notion of the family is built upon ideas of possessiveness and the exclusion of the rest of the world. This shall be translated into a dominant attitude toward his wife and daughters, which is related to Oates' critique of inflexible individualism. Jesse does not learn the true nature of Dr. Pedersen until he helps his stepmother to leave him and she discloses to him the true nightmarish and brutal personality of her husband. This comes as a shock to Jesse, but he is able to react in a rather controlled manner to the subsequent events, including his expulsion from the Pedersen family. In this respect, he resembles Carroll's Alice, who is a model "to recognize fear, even terror, without succumbing to it" (Oates *Lost* 42).

After Dr. Pedersen discovers that Jesse has assisted Mrs. Pedersen in her plan to run away, he expels him from the family with a letter reading: "I pronounce you dead to me. You have no existence. You are nothing [j] now you are eradicated by that family" (*Wonderland* 195). Jesse's fear of being rejected has materialized once more. Moreover, Dr. Pedersen's choice of words hits at the core of Jesse's insecurities and his doubts about how to construct his own self, since he is literally depriving him of his existence as "Jesse Pedersen" by expelling him from the family. As the main character can no longer be Jesse Pedersen, he comes back to be Jesse Vogel, adopting his biological mother's maiden name, and rejecting his biological father's surname, Harte. This preference can be read as a rebuff to his father Willard and perhaps a



homage to the memory of his murdered mother Nancy. Although Jesse gradually acquires misogynistic tendencies similar to those of his father figures, he also possesses a small degree of empathy for women, as proved by the scene in which he helps Mrs. Pedersen to flee from her house, and in the present homage to his mother. Despite all the traits that he absorbs, we see that Jesse has still retained some of his agency.

#### **5.4.5 Dr. Perrault: Personality, Brain and Shadow**

After founding his own family with Helene Cady, Jesse finds his last paternal figure, Dr. Roderick Perrault, which represents his fifth abandonment. Jesse works as Dr. Perrault's assistant: he is his Chief Resident at LaSalle hospital in Chicago. It is significant to notice that this character is referred to as either "Dr. Perrault" or "Perrault," which contrasts with the consistent naming of his previous father as "Dr. Pedersen." Perhaps this remarks that Dr. Pedersen prioritizes his profession over his family and behaves as a professional even when he is with them: he does not know how to balance his job and his family position; whereas Perrault presents a slightly more balanced approach to his identity.

This dual naming of the character may also indicate that Jesse (who holds the main focalization in the novel) is starting to question the influence that these figures have over him, or their authority upon him: he is not the blind admirer he used to be. This is a gradual process, though; since at the beginning Jesse is totally dedicated to Dr. Perrault and impersonates him in a noticeable manner:

Jesse had set out to copy the man, reproducing in his work as a surgeon Perrault's flawless technique, so that Perrault came to trust him and no one else. [...] In Jesse's hearing he said once that he trusted Dr. Vogel because "when Dr. Vogel operates it is myself operating, my six-foot self."  
(*Wonderland* 332)

It seems that Dr. Perrault himself is quite fond of this identification: this could account as a narcissistic trait not unlike those of Dr. Pedersen. The quote also emphasizes Jesse's yearning to be needed by someone, to belong to someone. Other people notice this necessity: for instance,

Helene accuses Jesse of constantly defending Dr. Perrault, whom, in her opinion, treats him like a servant. As Bender notes, Dr. Perrault regards Jesse not as a separate being but an extension of his alter-ego (57).

Dr. Perrault becomes an inspiration for Jesse, who seeks perfection as a surgeon: “He keeps me going at a pace I couldn’t maintain by myself... he forces me to be much better than I really am” (*Wonderland* 367). Jesse is then extremely grateful and committed to Dr. Perrault, and is said to “worship” him although the doctor is frequently sarcastic and rude to him. Seeing him in a realistic light, Jesse tries not to be hurt about his attitude; but he is starting to question Dr. Perrault’s value as a role model. However, he occasionally seems to expect more from his mentor, and is hopeful of “the approach of a dramatic, dangerous moment—a revelation of some kind; the possibility that Dr. Perrault might speak to him without irony, frankly, clearly, perhaps with love” (*Wonderland* 331). This does not take place, though. On the contrary, Dr. Perrault becomes increasingly bitter, impertinent and jealous of Jesse’s advances, but Jesse endures his bad temper without a word of complaint.

Dr. Perrault’s lethal and destructive personality is perfectly defined during a dinner to which Helene and Jesse are invited along with Helene’s father Dr. Cady. In this dinner, the binary brain/mind is profusely discussed. This is one of the main topics that *Wonderland* raises. As Bender remarks, the atmosphere during the dinner is oppressive. The subliminal commands during this “communion” are “Eat Me, Drink Me,” the famous sentences from *Alice in Wonderland*. Ironically, the discussion revolves around a denial of physicality, in which Oates clearly satirizes the excesses of behaviorism and its imposition of mind-control (59). Dr. Perrault argues that a personality is

a conscious system of language. And when the language deteriorates, as it must, the personality vanishes and we have only the brute matter left—the brain and its electric impulses [j] the personality is an illusion, and there is no one of us sitting around this table who truly possesses any

personality [j] Personality is just a tradition that dies hard. (*Wonderland* 355)

He is asserting that human beings are simply a set of fixed responses to certain stimuli, as behaviorism proclaimed. Helene is the only one who challenges him, asking what he means. At first, Dr. Perrault does not explain his words but merely rephrases them, smiling at her condescendingly. Jesse realizes that the old man despises women, that he does not even believe in women's existence; and becomes aware that perhaps he himself does not believe in women as he believes in men. Jesse's misogyny has been blatant throughout most of the book. Thus, as Bender argues, Jesse is sympathetic to his pregnant wife (he is worried about her having another miscarriage); but he is more sympathetic to his mentors who even try to deny female identity (59).

Then Dr. Perrault goes on to explain his point of view, remarking that

the personality [j ] that we encounter in those we think we love is [j] a pattern of attitudes that are expressed in certain language patterns we recognize because we are accustomed to them, you might say *conditioned* to them [j] The original chaos. [j] We each have a hidden obsession, I suppose, a kind of monster that has made our facial structures what they are on the surface, the facial mask that is our own, uniquely in the universe, and we try to keep this monster secret, except perhaps to ourselves. And some of us never see the monster in ourselves] This is the personality people defend. But it is only ephemeral. With a tiny pin in my fingers, [j] I can destroy any personality in about thirty seconds. (*Wonderland* 356, emphasis in the original)

In this quote, we perceive Bender's description of Dr. Perrault as another Oatesian academic caricature, who in this case resembles a combination of the behaviorist Burrhus Frederick Skinner (as Friedman

also affirms in *Joyce* 106) and Carl Jung's archetypal "wise old man"<sup>41</sup> (Bender 59).

The archetype of the wise old man appears under several forms: a king, a man, a medicine man, a savior, etc. It is described as a dangerous kind of archetype: if awoken, the subject can be convinced that she/he possesses its magic power and wisdom, prophetic powers and healing etc. Such a subject can be able to gather many followers who become fascinated by her/his words, even if upon reflection they realize that they make no sense. Actually, the subject does not possess such wisdom, because that wisdom is simply an unconscious voice that needs to be under the control of a conscious critique: it needs to be understood in order to acquire an accessible worth. When the subject expresses his ideas, which actually come from the unconscious, she/he is bound to become possessed, and a megalomaniac. If instead she/he is able to listen to that unconscious voice and to understand the power that is working through her/him, the subject may truly develop her/his personality (Fordham 65).

As Bender asserts, Dr. Perrault is indeed possessed by the Jungian old man archetype: he has a great number of followers who think greatly of him, among them, Jesse and Dr. Cady; even if Jesse does not totally agree with him upon all occasions. He is also a megalomaniac, although it is not known if his wisdom comes from his unconscious. He is so convinced of the accuracy of his theories that he does not admit any criticism to them, and he enormously dislikes Helene's challenging of his ideas.

Just like Skinner, Perrault disregards the concept of the mind. Skinner developed the theory of operant conditioning, based on

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<sup>41</sup> Archetypes are the content of the collective unconscious: they are the psychological equivalent to the notion of instinct. In a wider sense, they refer to a collective image or symbol. They are oneiric images and fantasies similar to the universal motives of religions, myths, legends, etc. Archetypes are perceived by means of certain typical images that appear once and again in our mind. We may suppose that these images were formed during the millennia in which human brain and human consciousness were slowly developing from an animal state; but their representations (that is, the archetypal images) are modified in accordance to the epoch in which they appear (Fordham 27, 199). On its turn, the Jungian collective unconscious is innate, and composed by the unknown material from which our conscious emerges. Its existence can be deduced from the observation of instinctive actions, which are inherited and unconscious. In other words, we tend to perceive and experience life as conditioned by the remote history of humanity (Fordham 26-27).

strategies of reinforcement and punishment of certain behaviors. Skinner was influenced by John B. Watson's philosophy of psychology known as behaviorism, which rejected the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, as well as any psychological explanation based on mental states and internal representations (such as beliefs, desires, memories or plans). The mind was considered a pre-scientific superstition, not suitable for empirical investigation. Skinner thought that the goal of psychology as a science was to predict and control an organism's behavior from its current situation and its history of reinforcement. He also argued that human behavior was controlled by its environment, and that the future of humanity depended on abandoning the concepts of individual freedom and dignity, and engineering the human environment in order to systematically control behavior that led to desirable ends ("B. F. Skinner" n. p.).

As Smith explains, Skinner focused first on voluntary behaviors, and tried to study them by trying to anticipate and control them. Control played a great role in his theories: he reflected on how to modify behaviors by means of reinforcement or punishments. He wrote about teaching techniques; that is, about how the subject could turn into a self-possessed, creative and motivated person, and how teachers could contribute to this (Smith 2, 3, 6). In Oates's novel *Hazards of Time Travel*, the protagonist questions the postulates of behaviorism despite the general adscription of her college department of psychology to the theory. Unlike Jesse, she does not blindly accept the knowledge she is presented with but develops her own opinions.

Thus, Perrault favors the brain instead of the mind, giving it absolute preponderance over other considerations such as individual personalities. In Bender's words, Dr. Perrault thinks that feelings are a threat to rational control, and so he tries to reduce the soul to an operable mechanical entity, the brain (59). Dr. Perrault also employs the term "conditioning" which is of course central to Skinner's ideas: he basically denies the existence of love and remarks that it is simply a set of patterns fixed by means of language. This is a total rejection of the possibility of empathy or generosity, for it envisions a selfish motivation behind love. Actually, as we shall see, Dr. Perrault rejects the very concept of feelings.

The previous quotation from *Wonderland* in which Dr. Perrault argues that every person has an obsession (often unconscious) that she/he tries to keep hidden also points at another of Jung's most prominent archetypes: the shadow. The Jungian shadow is that part of oneself that inhabits the unconscious. It is the inferior self within oneself who wishes to do the things we are not allowed to do, who is everything that one is not; the primitive, the uncontrolled, the animal part of our self. The shadow also personifies itself: when we see somebody and greatly dislike her/him, it might be suspected that what we dislike is that quality of ourselves that we perceive in another person (Fordham 54).

It is important, then, to learn how to coexist with the shadow, Jung argues. Accepting the shadow implies making significant moral efforts, and renouncing to ideals that we have entertained for a long time because such ideals were too elevated, or based on an illusion. Trying to live like better persons leads us to hypocrisy and failure and provides a tension that often makes us become even worse. The irritability and intolerance of the self-righteous are well known. Although a certain repression is needed in social life, repressing the shadow in the unconscious makes the shadow stronger. Thus, when it surfaces, it is more dangerous: it may surpass the personality without the constraints that had previously tied it. Jung asserts that nobody is able to perceive her/his own shadow unless she/he has strong moral convictions and redirects her/his schemes and ideas (Fordham 56-57).

It is essential to bring these opposites to the conscious knowledge; otherwise, an increased dissociation and neurosis appear. Everyone has these shadows, which are not erased or totally assimilated by the "I." There is an ethical obligation to recognize its existence and assume a responsibility toward them, instead of continuing to project it (Salman 121-122). Jung argued that the path to psychologic health and sense needs to navigate through the shadow (Salman 121-122).

As seen, Dr. Perrault argues that everyone carries a monster within herself/himself, and that at times this is not even noticed by the subject. This is precisely Jesse's case: he carries a potential murderer within him, as well as an incestuous predator. As Fordham explains, Jesse does not perceive his shadow because he has extremely elevated moral

standards based on the illusion of a perfect control over each aspect of his life. Due to Jesse's repression of the shadow, it grows stronger, until his murderous tendencies are about to explode at the end of the novel when he considers shooting his daughter's lover.

When Helene challenges Dr. Perrault's assertions of the preponderance of the brain over the mind, the men in the room (Dr. Perrault himself, Jesse, and Helene's father Dr. Cady) call her "sentimental," "hysterical" and "nervous;" while in fact Helene is confronting the old man quite coldly and rationally. As mentioned in the chapter "Mothers," women (especially mothers) have been often labelled as hysterical, often as an attempt to counterbalance their reproductive power by demeaning and infantilizing them. The claim over reproductive power, that is, its appropriation, is a crucial aspect of the conversation.

Dr. Perrault then affirms that without the senses, the brain is no longer a personality, but Helene contradicts him again. Dr. Cady says that indeed the brain would still have a personality because it would have memory: for him, "a personality is largely memory, conscious or unconscious" (*Wonderland* 357). Memory is one of the central issues of the novel, as Oates remarks: "[m]uch in *Wonderland* has to do with memory. The escape from memory, the surrender to memory. Theories of memory. The 'invention' of memory" ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 483). In fact, this conversation deals with hypotheses about the mechanisms and origins of memory. The escape from memory, on its turn, is personified by Jesse, who spends much of his life escaping and denying his terrifying past but finally surrenders to memory at the end, by recognizing all the losses that he has suffered during his life.

Oates extrapolates the question of memory to the very format she uses in *Wonderland*: the novel. In novels, both readers and characters share memories; and so, if for example Jesse forgets something that the plot mentions, the attentive reader will remember it, because he is a part of Jesse's consciousness. Oates concludes that there can be no person without memory ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 483). Thus, Oates seems to agree with Dr. Cady when he asserts that for the most part, a personality resides in memory. In her novel *The Man Without a Shadow*, the issue of memory is approached once more by means of the

story of a man who suffers from amnesia and forgets who he is from day to day. The loss of memory is in this novel a loss of identity, since memory confirms who we are.

Next, the conversation in *Wonderland* turns upon the possibility of transplanting brains, and how would those brains relate to the new body and its senses. Dr. Perrault asserts that a brain would be “better off without a body. [j] It wouldn’t be so distracted by the senses. It would be pure. Whatever its function might be, it would respond more quickly” (*Wonderland* 359). Helene rejects this possibility, wondering what kind of life would that be, but Dr. Perrault says that a great mind does not belong to the body it was born in, but to its culture, and physical and mental environment; and that the government should have a perfect right to demand certain brains to be preserved, adding that the brains would not have a choice upon their own disposal: they should be taken for the good of science, because no brain owns itself. This would be a kind of resurrection, he says, since it would allow the brain to survive the decay of its body. These words are echoing Skinner’s in his envisioning of a future abandonment of individual freedom and dignity in favor of controlling behaviors and leading them to desirable ends by engineering the human environment.

Daly explains the implications of this point of view in the following words: Dr. Perrault considers that the body has no wisdom, and that we would be better off without the distraction of the senses. When he dreams of scientists selecting the brains of brilliant men (so that reproduction is enacted by male brains instead of women’s uterus), he is mimicking a modern Frankenstein (59). Jesse draws a certain family model from Perrault’s ideas: one in which the father is not only the head of the family, but also the creator of life, in the place of the mother. Perrault exposes a new attempt to diminish the creative capacity of women not only from a scientific and artistic point of view, but also from a purely biological one: he defends the enactment of the myth of monogenetic conception. Helene rejects Perrault’s position, her opposition being particularly significant because she is pregnant at the time: she feels diminished by the old man’s comments. This is a way to deny the mother role, as well as the creative role of mothers that we have mentioned in the chapter “Mothers.”



The transplanting of brains is further explored in Oates's short story "The Brain of Dr. Vicente" from the collection *The Poisoned Kiss and Other Tales from the Portuguese Fernandes* (1975). In this story, Dr. Vicente has been able to keep his brain alive beyond his death by means of a machine designed by him. He cannot feel anything, though, because his senses are not functional. He is described as "a pure brain" (*Poisoned* 27), such as the one that Dr. Perrault dreams of. Dr. Vicente is able to communicate by means of ciphers that a computer translates into language. His students want to return him to the world and try to find a body for him; but he rejects all of them. They finally transplant his brain into a corpse that has undergone surgical operations in order to resemble him; but even so, Dr. Vicente does not speak, despite having the ability to do so in his new location. He finally rejects the new body by scribbling in a piece of paper the same word that he had used in his previous rejections: "impossible," an expression that no one remembers he used when he was alive. This suggests the dehumanization that he has undergone by being deprived of his senses, because he used to be a warm and patient man who never addressed anyone so harshly but now, he is extremely detached and impassive. In the end, the brain goes back to its compartment, where he exists "without human distractions" (*Poisoned* 28). He is endlessly thinking, but nobody knows what he is thinking about, or even if he remembers them. The horrifying story poses one possible outcome for Dr. Perrault's proposal of transplanting brains and disavowing the weight of senses: living a totally isolated life deprived of emotions and the most basic empathy. The story also rejects the suggestion that the self resides only in the brain, as Dr. Perrault defends.

Helene perfectly understands the criminal consequences of Dr. Perrault's thesis and accuses him of being a sick, crazy killer. Dr. Perrault asks Jesse if he agrees with his wife, but Jesse says nothing. As Bender says, by protesting and calling Dr. Perrault a killer, Helene is defying Dr. Perrault as one of the novels murdering fathers (59), since Perrault is described as having dominant and destructive tendencies that are a threat to those around him; similar to those of Willard Harte and Dr. Pedersen.

Dr. Perrault's defense of a total disregard for personalities stands in sharp contrast to the ideas of homeostasis and equilibrium of which Jesse is so fond; but as Bender remarks, Jesse is not willing to discuss the frightening implications of Dr. Perrault's words, but clings instead to his homeostatic poise (59). As Johnson adds, when Helene calls Dr. Perrault a killer, Jesse reconsiders his alliance to him. The ending of this scene suggests that Jesse is no longer completely aligned with anyone and must become isolated once again (while at the same time becoming increasingly liberated from the domination of male figures), continuing to look for a definition: "[h]is mind was a blank [j] he felt the terrible, open purity of his brain, which belonged to no one at all" (*Wonderland* 362) (*Understanding* 129-130).

Yeats's epigraph at the beginning of *Wonderland*, reading "knowledge increases unreality," can be interpreted, Creighton remarks, as Jesse's increased sense of disconnection with the world by means of his medical career, because to accept Dr. Perrault's words is to accept that the brain has no connection to the outer world or even its own body (*Joyce* 78). In Johnson's words, the novel wonders whether our personalities are defined by our brains, and what is the distinction between the brain and the "mind;" that is, whether we are tragically limited by our physical selves (especially our brain chemistry), or capable of transcending fate, escaping our entrapment in a universe of flux and in bodies that must inevitably die. It also wonders if there is something separable from the brain called "mind" or "soul" (*Invisible* 185, *Understanding* 117). Oates confirms that *Wonderland* is a novel about the human brain, of which there is no way out: we are confined within it. We cannot adequately explain the relationship between brain and mind, she concludes ("Dark Lady" 20); but in any case, this relationship is linked to the question of control: "*Wonderland* is about the obsession with control that is characteristic of American life; its metaphorical analogue in the novel is the control of the brain over the body. The triumph of (generational) control at any cost can be a very bad thing" (Oates "Written Interviews" 548-549).

The obsession with control is blatant in Jesse, and this is closely related with the Jungian shadow, which at this stage grows considerably in Jesse due to his intention of repressing part of his personality. Jesse

will tentatively accept his shadow in the end of the original novel (and more fully in the revision), but this is not a simple process. As Waller notes, Jesse's problem is to define his inner being in a society that simultaneously cultivates individualism and yet is increasingly deterministic. He reflects that perhaps ambition, success, well-defined and achievable goals will satisfy him. In the end, he concludes that having control is essential; since if he had control of himself, Jesse Vogel, then nothing else would matter ("Joyce" 40). The problem with these goals is that they are too elevated, and will prove to be unfeasible in the end. In order to acknowledge his shadow, Jesse would have to recognize the unrealistic dimension of his dreams.

Jesse's strategy, as Johnson remarks, is escaping the depths of his personality by strictly controlling his life, and denying what he considers emotional and therefore "irrational." Jesse tries to subdue the "phantasmagoria of personality" to science: he treats the brain as a physical phenomenon and ignores the most riddling psychological questions (*Understanding* 124, 126-127). This flight from personality by means of control is related with the Jungian shadow: Jesse's illusion of control is making the shadow stronger. He also tries to generate control by imposing the will of his brain to the drives of his body. This is part of the reason why he denies the body's instincts.

Just like Jesse, most of the male characters in *Wonderland* have problems with control. As Johnson recalls, Willard's murder rampage was a total loss of control (or alternatively, we might infer that it is his last act of brutal domination over his family); Dr. Pedersen's method of control involved a ruthless domination of all around him; and Dr. Cady and Dr. Perrault represent control over the brain and the scientific domination of its wayward impulses, including, presumably, those of personality (*Understanding* 126-127). All these men are Jesse's parents, or father-figures for some time; and thus their obsession with control must surely have influenced the emergence of the same pull in Jesse. In sum, Oates argues, "*Wonderland*, as a title, refers to both America, as a region of wonders, and the human brain, as a region of wonders. And 'wonders' can be both dream and nightmare" ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 482).

Finally, Jesse starts to resent Dr. Perrault's antagonism and decides to detach from him permanently: "Perrault wanted to drag him down. But he would not drag him down [...]. In a few more months, Jesse would be free of him. And he was really free of him now" (*Wonderland* 416). In this manner, Jesse keeps on reproducing Alice's qualities by acquiring, like her, "an inclination to be skeptical, at times, of the adults who surround her; an unwillingness to be bossed around or frightened into submission" (Oates *Lost* 41-42) that he had not possessed before. He is starting to cut his bonds to his paternal figures, and to gain a degree of autonomy from them. In this way, Jesse decides to establish his own clinic: he is now starting to visibly cut his bonds with Dr. Perrault. This separation is not easily achieved, though, for he realizes the dangers of lacking his mentor's protection; and still yearns to find a true connection with him:

Working himself free of the old man [j] he yet realized that Perrault protected him from the world even now. [...] He could not erase in himself a sense of absolute, utter, sweetish dependency, a helplessness in the presence of the old man that grew out of love. It was permanent in him. But at the same time he thought eagerly, guiltily, of the years when he would be free... a better surgeon than Perrault himself... [j] And then all that would remain of Dr. Perrault would be Dr. Vogel's carefully cherished memory of him. (*Wonderland* 416)

Unlike Cressida, Jesse is soon conscious of the dichotomy between wishing to be free from one family's influence (in this case, from his surrogate father Dr. Perrault), while at the same time benefitting from its protection. He also comprehends that family bonds cannot be effortlessly, or at times even entirely, destroyed. The quote emphasizes once more Jesse's vampirical traits: he will usurp Dr. Perrault's memory and replace him by completing his work after his death.

Therefore, Dr. Perrault's abandonment is first materialized in his unappreciative and disdainful treatment of Jesse, and later on, in the irreversible abandonment caused by his death. After his demise, Jesse misses him and regrets that their relationship could not have been

warmer. Jesse's feeling of loss reminds him of all the previous losses of his life, as he tells his wife:

he's dead, I know that [...] But I keep seeing him in my imagination. I keep having conversations with him. [j] People work themselves into the lives of others, into their brains. He exists in me, in my brain. [...] where do they go when they die? These people? They seem to be backing off from me, leaving me, I can't keep hold of them... there is always something unfinished about them, about them and me... [j] I need these people. I love them and I need them... (*Wonderland* 435)

This is one of the most revealing quotes from the book, and one of the few times in which Jesse alludes to his past in front of Helene, even if it is indirectly. Here, Jesse laments that the people that abandoned him left him with a sense of incompleteness due to their sudden disappearance. At the same time, he also regrets not being able to retain them to exert an everlasting control over them. It is also significant that Jesse asserts that Dr. Perrault still exists in his brain, thus reflecting the old man's preference for the brain over the senses. In any case, before the old man dies, Jesse is starting to escape the influence of his father-figures, but this process has not finished yet, as seen in the last section.

#### **5.4.6 Jesse as a Father**

Jesse's sixth and last abandonment is represented by his daughter Shelley. Since the relationship between Jesse and Shelley has already been covered in the chapter "Fathers," we shall focus exclusively on the effect of this bond upon Jesse's identity. Despite the fact that in this occasion, Jesse is the father and not the teenage/young adult son, this episode is discussed in this chapter because it represents the culmination (in the novel) of Jesse's series of abandonments and a crucial step for his identity formation.

The names of Jesse's daughters Jeanne and Shelley are phonetically similar to those of Jesse's deceased sisters Jean and Shirley, which proves the lasting nature of his trauma. Jeanne and Shelley have opposed characters: Jeanne is a serious, responsible and

contemplative girl; while Shelley is disorganized, inattentive and dreamy. Shelley's personal traits instantly recall those of a typical Gothic heroine, given to daydreaming and fantasy. This is one of the novel's Gothic traits, also noticed in the plot development: the girl flees from her controlling and potentially dangerous father only to fall in the hands of a similarly demonic lover.

Jeanne's and Shelley's contrasting descriptions recall Juliet and Cressida Mayfield from *Carthage*. The four girls exhibit fairy-tale qualities that define them by means of their opposing features: Jeanne is the "obedient" daughter while Shelley is the "rebellious" daughter; and Juliet is the "pretty" daughter as opposed to Cressida, the "smart" daughter. Similarly, Jeanne is also the "ugly" daughter, unlike "beautiful" Shelley. Besides, Jeanne is jealous and resentful of Shelley, just as Cressida is envious of her sister Juliet. These negative feelings are partly motivated by the perception that Shelley and Juliet are the favorite daughters of their parents. Such feeling is not proved in *Carthage*; but it is precisely the case in *Wonderland*, where Shelley is Jesse's favorite daughter.

When he becomes a father, it seems that Jesse has progressed in his life and apparently fulfilled his dreams by establishing his clinic and forming his so-called Self-Created Family System. On the one hand, the clinic becomes a projection of himself, just as he is a projection of his father role models: "The Vogel Clinic. Chicago, Illinois. He would be The Vogel Clinic. Himself" (*Wonderland* 415). The building's new wing would be like a "further extension of Jesse's brain, his energy" (*Wonderland* 465). The clinic appears to make Jesse feel satisfied and fulfilled, but he grows increasingly restless. He roams around at night, unable to sleep, just as his biological father had done just before committing a mass murder-suicide; proving that Jesse's shadow is starting to dominate him and that he is turning into a potentially murderous father himself.

On the other hand, Jesse's dream of having a perfect family is far from reality, that is, his Desired Family System does not match his real Self-Created Family System: his relationship with Helene is cool and distant, his daughters do not satisfy him, and he cannot have a son. Besides, he grows increasingly controlling of Shelley. As explained, the

girl starts to realize her father's perusal on the day that President Kennedy is assassinated. This is a good example of how Oates entangles American crucial historical facts with the destinies of their characters, and how these historical moments almost displace the focus of the narrative away from the characters.

This unexpected, violent murder strikes at the core of Jesse's fears and dilemmas about the relationship between the body and the mind and the meaning of death: "He could not quite believe that the President was dead. What did that mean? Dead? A bullet in the head—the brain—yes, the brain—and so someone was dying, someone was dead? The President was permanently dead?" (*Wonderland* 414). The fact that Kennedy is killed by a bullet being shot to his brain evokes the conversation that the Vogels, Dr. Cady, and Dr. Perrault had had about where personality resides, and makes an old terror of Jesse reemerge: abandonments, the most terrible one being, of course, death (which at the same time is a reality that denies the capacity of mind domination over the body). After this incident, Jesse, reflecting on the need to protect his daughters, buys a gun. He seems to start following the murderous pull of his repressed shadow, replicating Willard's decision of exerting control by means of a firearm.

In sum, the president's assassination functions as a sort of epiphany for Jesse: he becomes terrified as he realizes the fleetness and vulnerability of human life. Up to that moment, he has already suffered five losses of fathers and surrogate figures, and he does not feel capable of assuming another one. Particularly, he fears that his daughters could be somehow harmed. His wish for protection works as a justification for his maniac control of Shelley: he tells himself that he is trying to protect her, when he is actually smothering her.

Since Shelley's first escape from home, the clinic ceases to be a motivational force for Jesse. All his dreams are crumbling: his work does not satisfy him any longer and he is both worried about and obsessed with Shelley. He starts to control her activities and whereabouts closely, urged by another part of himself which he calls Dr. Vogel, as seen in his reflections when he picks Shelley up from jail:

At the clinic, there was the image of Dr. Vogel moving restlessly about, like a shadow jerking across the wall of

his office or along the corridor or even in the operating room, the panicked Dr. Vogel who could think of only one thing: his daughter. [...] That other Dr. Vogel, who worried so much about his daughter, wanted to draw him into a deeper anguish and destroy him. This other self had sprung out of him on that ride home from Toledo. It had taken hold of Shelley and shaken her violently, knocking her head from side to side. Why did you leave home! Why! Tell me why! But Jesse [j] forced himself to [j] show no agitation. He did not want to frighten her any more. He did not want to punish her. (*Wonderland* 456-457, emphasis in the original)

The narrator refers to him as “Dr. Vogel” instead of the usual “Jesse” to mark this transition. This splitting is similar to the pairing “Aaron/Krull” in *Bird*. These doppelgangers/shadows, Dr. Vogel and Krull, embody the invariably determined, impulsive, violent and domineering part of the characters’ personality. According to Masao Miyoshi’s division, they would fit into the category of thematic or ideological doppelgangers, since, by means of their division, they project a philosophical view of self-alienation: Jesse will remain isolated as long as he cannot integrate both sides of his self, that is, as long as he cannot admit his shadow and assimilate its negative traits into his more positive image of himself.

Therefore, “Jesse” becomes the sensitive father, the one who perceives his daughter’s uneasiness and is careful not to disturb her any further. In contrast, “Dr. Vogel,” who is referred to by his medical profession, seems to suggest the scientific detachment that Jesse imbues into his job; and thus, as “Dr. Vogel,” he is the dominant father who becomes enraged at Shelley’s rebellion. As a result, Dr. Vogel’s figure serves to discard Jesse’s vulnerabilities, as seen when he deals with the police regarding Shelley’s first running away: “Jesse’s shame could have been any father’s shame, not Dr. Vogel” (*Wonderland* 458).

Jesse gradually starts to recognize the figure of Dr. Vogel as his repressed shadow. This is a healthy recognition: leaving the shadow in the unconscious would have made it stronger. However, Jesse does not fully perceive it yet; and hence, there is still danger of the shadow controlling him. In this manner, Dr. Vogel becomes the driving force



that encourages him to look for Shelley. This is ironical: the doctor, a professional man, is more focused upon his daughter than his profession. The fact that Jesse's shadow is a doctor appears to be an inversion of Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde where Hyde is enacted by "Dr. Vogel." Even the surname "Vogel" (German for "bird") seems ironic here, because the shadow resembles a hunter trying to trap the character, instead of resembling a free bird. He is turning into a totally authoritarian father, like Dr. Pedersen or Willard.

When Jesse eventually finds Shelley and Noel, Noel proclaims that he does not exist. Friedman ascribes Noel's assertion to nihilism because he teaches an absolute denial of the ego, history and existence, to which Shelley adheres as well (*Joyce* 109). Since they are unable to find a balance between the self and the world, they give preference to the self. This non-existence recalls one of the central themes of the novel, Jesse's apparently lack of personality: he spends most of his life looking for identity traits in others and adopting them in order to construct his own identity. That is, he does have a personality, but it is composed by a tangle of traits he has absorbed from others, from which he develops an extremely dominant ego. The difference with Noel is that the young man proclaims his non-existence, whereas Jesse desperately wishes for a stable and defined identity.

As explained, *Wonderland* has two different endings, which pose divergent resolutions to Jesse's identity conflicts. In the first edition of the book, after "rescuing" his daughter, Jesse promises her that she will not be frightened again, apparently unaware of (or consciously overlooking) the fact that it was him whom she had always feared. This is the great irony of the novel, which in Oates's words is linked to America's history: "This was the tragedy of America in the 1960s, the story of a man who becomes the very figure he has been fleeing since boyhood: a son of the devouring Cronus who, unknowingly, becomes Cronus himself" ("Afterword" *Wonderland* 2006, 479). Jesse will only start to realize his transformation in the last pages of the original novel.

Jesse is elated to have "won," as he mentally phrases it. He then leaves with his daughter, who is unable to forcibly resist because she is extremely weak. Jesse panics when he perceives that Shelley is dying, recalling all the abandonments he has suffered:

“Why are you dying? [...] Why are you going away from me, all of you, going away one by one...” he said [...] Where were they all going, these people who had abandoned him?—one by one, going away, abandoning him? Was there a universe of broken people, flung out of their orbits but still living, was there perhaps a Jesse there already in that void, the true, pure, undefiled Jesse, who watched this struggling Jesse with pity? “All of you... everyone... all my life, everyone... Always you are going away from me and you don’t come back to explain...” Jesse wept. (*Wonderland* 508-509)

Jesse feels all the weight of the numerous losses of his life, from which he has never fully recovered, in part due to his refusal or inability to deal with trauma. He is overlooking his own responsibility for some of these events, especially, his rigid wish for absolute control that has partly precipitated the present situation. He realizes that he cannot control everything or save everyone: after all he has done to “rescue” her, Shelley is dying. In sum, the core of Jesse’s lasting trauma is his inability to assume the losses of his life; including his rigid fantasies about his Desired Family System, which prevent him from adjusting to the reality of his life and assume, for instance, Shelley’s need of her own space; or that his Self-Created Family System he does not have a son.

As Creighton adds, the quote proves that Jesse cannot find stability in the world as he laments his perpetual broken bonds with others (*Joyce* 81). This ending becomes, as Oates has asserted, a tragedy of the isolated ego (“Correspondence” 62). The author asserts that in her works, tragedy is born “out of a break between self and community, a sense of isolation” (qtd. in Grant 15). Indeed, Jesse finds himself totally isolated, floating with his moribund daughter in an adrift small boat in the middle of Lake Ontario, lamenting his disconnection to others. There is no catharsis, closed ending, or real epiphany for Jesse (although the possibility of him having one in the future is not discarded either).

As Daly explains, this version of the novel features Jesse’s belief in a unified “I”: the I of the romantic ego and a denial of the connection

to others that in his case is accompanied by the subordination of women. Ideally, he should now move beyond his emotional paralysis. Nevertheless, Jesse's education has been almost exclusively based on the language of science, and it has not prepared him to explore the body/brain connection, or the central nervous system that connects them, within the context of language and culture (48, 66-67).

Jesse shows interpretative understanding at this point: he should need to consider his position in a profound manner, and this is precisely what he is tentatively starting to do here. Possibly, the next step in Jesse's search for identity is consciously recognizing his shadow and that he has become a Cronus-like figure and imposed an unbearable control over others. This would imply undergoing a long process of self-assessment in order to solve the traumas and riddles of his life. Specifically, Friedman remarks, while trying to rescue Shelley, Jesse learns that the overflow of the self to others cannot be contained (*Joyce* 96) that is, that he cannot live isolated from others by selfishly placing his ego before any other consideration without acknowledging the agency of the people around him. Bender believes that the ending has a tentative note of optimism and that Jesse shall be able to start a journey of self-realization. When embarking a boat with Shelley without knowing where it would take them, Jesse is relaxing his control, just as he does by throwing the pistol to the water. He sheds the trappings of his old personality, and awaits his soul's deliverance and a possible resolution of the contradictions of his life. Thus, the first edition of the novel moves to visionary possibility, while the second retreats from a view of transformation (66-67). However, there is no real evidence that Jesse will completely relax his control, because the ending is vague, as many critics have remarked: Friedman, for instance, argues that it is ambiguous because Jesse is still looking for himself (*Joyce* 110); whereas Creighton notices there is not any resolution in here, because Jesse is still puzzling over his failure to control experience and other people (*Joyce* 81, 85).

In the revised version, Noel runs away and Jesse takes Shelley away grabbing her with great strength, feeling "the enormous power of his muscles, his blood, his brain, the power to hold her here and to keep her from dying" (*Wonderland* 2006, 476), and thus reaffirming his

power over her based on his physical/bodily strength. Jesse appears to take control in here by uniting these elements that he had been previously incapable of integrating: his body, his blood, and his brain. He now puts them to the task of trying to overcome death, which has always been his greatest ambition, and which in this version of the novel, he seems to conquer. This version concludes with Shelley calling his father a devil who has come to bring her home, to which Jesse answers “Am I?” (*Wonderland* 2006, 477). This question proves that Jesse, despite clearly assuming a dominant role, and possibly internally assuming his shadow (thus getting rid of the hypocrisy that characterized his previous self-righteous aspirations) still holds some doubts about his own identity, and over his authoritative role, which leaves a small ground for transformation for him, as the previous version did.

The new version allows Shelley to keep her voice and her side of the story by surviving: she is not totally subordinated to Jesse’s perspective. Certainly, the revised ending gives a slightly wider degree of agency to Shelley: as she is not as sick as in the original version, she resists more forcefully to accompany Jesse. Most importantly, by surviving, Shelley is not sacrificed to the father’s authority. This was one of Oates’s goals for writing the revision, as Daly asserts: in the original novel, the voices of Helene and Shelley struggle to be heard, to intervene in Jesse’s quest: their voices call to Jesse to share their pain, but he has no vocabulary for his feelings, just as if his brain had no connection to his body (62, 64).

Throughout the novel, Jesse has been struggling to find his own language. He has looked for it in the monologic discourse of science, and inside women’s bodies, to whom he generally exhibited a disdain. Nevertheless, in the desperate search for his daughter, Jesse appears to have found his own voice, to accept what he had been denying for so long: the inescapable reality of death, and the pain of the abandonments he has suffered. As Daly concludes, it is only in the revision that, despite still assuming a dominant position, Jesse tentatively seems to begin to listen to Shelley (62).

## 5.5 SIBLINGS' RELATIONSHIPS

The process of identity formation within the family circle is conditioned not only by the relationship with parents, but also by the relationships among siblings. This is evident in the case of Cressida and Juliet; and even in the case of Jesse we may suspect that his deceased sisters have left a mark in his life, since the names he chooses for his daughters recall those of his sisters.

The sibling subsystem is the grouping of children in a family in which they interact as peers, negotiating issues of competition, defeat, accommodation, cooperation and protection (Sauber et al. 366). In the traditional family, the sibling subsystem is perhaps the most egalitarian subsystem of the family, unlike the parental subsystem, where the man holds the power; or the parent-children, where the parent usually occupies the position of authority. According to White and Woollett, siblings are similar to one another in many aspects: they have the same family and spend a great amount of time together; and they do not only share space but also resources, including toys, books, and pets. This sharing may be a source of conflicts: in *them*, Maureen shares her room with her sister Betty and she profoundly dislikes it, because they have divergent personalities and interests, and they lack an intimate space of their own. In many families, children spend more time interacting with one another than with their parents, especially when the relationship with their parents lacks warmth or consistency or there are marital problems and the siblings offer support to one another (White and Woollett 87), like Maureen and Jules, who have a better relationship between themselves than with their parents. At times, then, siblings can be stronger socializing influences than parents (Santrock 165).

As they grow up, siblings' similarities about competence, social skills and interests become more apparent. These similarities may be the reason why siblings get on well together (White and Woollett 87). This is evident in the increasing understanding that Patrick and Judd develop in *Mulvaney's*. In other novels from the corpus, such as *them*, siblings love each other despite having opposite interests and inclinations: Maureen and Jules illustrate opposed life choices, mostly based on stereotypes commonly associated to their gender.

Siblings interactions tend to be reciprocal in nature, as White and Woollett explain (5, 88-89). This finds reflection in the development of two opposite tendencies: cooperation and competition, which prepare them for relations and activities outside the family. During adolescence, siblings may help to build new relationships outside the family, since “siblings are companies who link one another into larger social worlds, including that of peers” (Bryant and DeMorris 174). Children who play a subordinate role to an older sibling may play a dominant role with a peer, and vice-versa (Abramovitch et al. qtd. in Bryant and DeMorris 174).

Competition usually takes the form of jealousy, as proved by Cressida’s envy of her sister Juliet in *Carthage*. In contrast, cooperation among siblings is prevalent in *Mulvaney’s*, where the narrator defines this bond as an “alliance” (*Mulvaney’s* 24). Siblings’ capacity for empathy is in fact incarnated in the character of Patrick Mulvaney, who unconditionally supports his sister Marianne. One of the strongest sibling bonds, apart from that of Marianne and Patrick, is that of Patrick and Judd. The most significant act of loyalty and collaboration between them is Judd’s involvement in Patrick’s revenge plan against their sister’s rapist:

Patrick says these words that shake me up: “I need your help, Judd.” It isn’t just the word *help* that’s just a surprise, coming from my brother. It’s my name *Judd*, my real name and not *Ranger*, or *kid* [j] . As if, in this instant, we’re equals. (*Mulvaney’s* 253, emphasis in the original)

In this particular case, the relevance of birth order comes into focus: Judd, the youngest child, is moved to see that his brother Patrick recognizes him as his equal and an adult; and not as his inconsequential baby brother. He is validating Judd as an autonomous person, and rejecting the imposed nicknames that belong to the self-deluding phase of the family when they considered themselves perfect, while, actually, each of the members was forced into a stereotyped position within the nuclear family by means of such sobriquets. Judd was reduced to be the ignorant and naïve toddler from whom much information was concealed in account of his age. Now, the family undergoes a

reorganization, and Patrick includes Judd as a functioning adult by treating him as an equal.

Patrick asks Judd to procure him one of their father's guns but does not tell his brother the whole plan (kidnapping and killing the rapist) in order to avoid incriminating him more than necessary. Judd feels a deep affection for his brother at this time: "I thought, *I have a brother! I am a brother! This is what it is—to be brothers!*" (Mulvaney 274, emphasis in the original). Being brothers, then, implies being tied not merely by blood, but also at a conscious level: the relationship is acquired by chance, but maintaining it is a conscious choice that requires an effort on both parts. In this case, Patrick does not only preserve his relationship to his little brother despite having left the house while Judd was rather young (something that Judd resents because he is left with his father and mother in a rather delicate situation, economic and otherwise); he is also the only Mulvaney to be constantly in touch with her banished sister Marianne. This corroborates White and Woollett's assertion that siblings show a great balance in taking responsibility for initiating and maintaining the relationship, especially if compared with relationships with adults (White and Woollett 88).

Siblings' relationships constitute one of the first contexts where children demonstrate their ability to understand feelings, interactions and need of others, since children's ability to put themselves in the position of their siblings may be facilitated by their similarities and shared interests. This capacity for empathy may also be caused by the siblings' prominence to one another and the emotional bond of their relationships. Moreover, children express their feelings towards their siblings overtly: they show warmth and assistance, and they respond to their siblings' distress. Negative emotions are common as well (White and Woollett 89).

Commonly, siblings do not have any inhibition in expressing their feelings, as Dunn emphasizes (qtd. in White and Woollett 89). The clarity and lack of inhibition commonly found among siblings are summarized by Loretta's attitude to her brother Brock at the beginning of *them*: "She spoke fast and hard, the way a sister speaks to a brother, hiding nothing" (*them* 15). Loretta is straightforward with her brother,

and after he reappears some years later, she makes her resentment at him clear; but she is also willing to welcome him and take care of him. However, at times siblings may show inhibitions when expressing their emotions. After his sister leaves the house, in *Mulvaney's*, Judd is unable to convey to her his conflictive emotions of sadness and love to her: their conversations on the telephone are awkward on his part. In *Bird*, Krista explains that her brother Ben would be furious if she saw him crying. This is possibly influenced as well by gender prejudices that dictate that men should not openly convey their emotions.

Krista also alludes to the pain that the estrangement from her brother brings to her after Zoe's murder: "I was sad—sometimes, I was angry—mostly I was bewildered—how had it happened, I'd once had an older brother who had been my friend—who had seemed to like me—to 'be on my side'—but now I had not" (*Bird* 467). In this case, the "strangeness" between these siblings starts after their father is accused of murder; more precisely, as Krista explains, it started "when one of us had come to believe that our father was a criminal, a killer; and the other had continued to love him" (*Bird* 413). Although it is later revealed that Ben does not really think that Edward is the murderer, he still resents him, maybe due to his disloyalty. Krista realizes that her brother's harshness toward her is a reaction to all the pain he has suffered: "Unable to hurt the person—or persons—who'd hurt him, Ben knew that he could always hurt me" (*Bird* 115). This is, precisely, what Aaron does when bullying Ben: he takes an indirect revenge on Ben's father Edward by harassing his son. In sum, then, Ben's and Krista's views are opposed and irreconcilable; and even as adults they are not able to mend their relationship and remain distant.

Sometimes, while growing up, siblings might continue to feel ambivalent emotions for one another. For instance, in *Mulvaney's*, Patrick feels an unexpected strangeness toward Marianne:

He, Patrick Mulvaney, was this young woman's brother: they'd been *brother-and-sister* through all of their conscious lives: each was more closely related to the other genetically than either was to either of their parents. Yet he believed he scarcely knew Marianne at all. He loved her, but scarcely knew her. Members of a family who've



lived together in the heated intensity of family life scarcely know one another. Life is too head-on, too close-up. That was the paradox. [j] For of course you never give such relationships a thought, living them. To give a *thought*—to *take thought*—is a function of dissociation, distance. You can't exercise memory until you've removed yourself from memory's source. (*Mulvaney's* 230, emphasis in the original)

This is extremely relevant, and accounts for the fact that members of the family are only able to actually, totally and inclusively perceive one another after they become separated. As Patrick reflects, living together infuses them with the unawareness of everyday routine, while acquiring distance allows characters to look at the relationship in a renewed light, with more objectivity. This also accounts for Clara's and Jules's new understanding of their deceased mother and father, respectively.

Moreover, siblings commonly hold intertwined emotions for one another that are not easily put into words, as Judd notes: "Impossible to say *Patrick hey: I love you. Patrick I'm angry as hell at you, I'll never forgive you for abandoning us but now you're back, now I've seen you and touched you I guess I love you again, so that's it*" (*Mulvaney's* 447, emphasis in the original). Maureen's ambivalent relationship to Jules is also summarized in a few words: "[s]he admired him, resented him" (*them* 120).

As White and Woollett suggest, shared experiences among siblings become more reduced as they go to school and develop friends of their own (90). But in general, siblings continue to be important companions into middle childhood and adolescence, and they keep on having ambivalent feelings such as jealousy, anger, friendliness, kindness, etc. In *them*, Maureen and Jules are important companions through most of their lives, despite undergoing diverse phases of separation and reunion.

### **5.5.1 Maureen's and Jules' Parallel Lives**

In this section, we shall compare and analyze what Santrock calls the socioemotional processes in the sibling's relationship between Jules and Maureen by examining how in the novel, their lives follow parallel courses from adolescence into young adulthood. This proves the

prevalence of their siblings' bond throughout their lives, even when they are not physically together. Their relationship is characterized by discordant feelings and states such as closeness, distance, envy, or cooperation. Another pivotal point of this discussion is how they have acquired gendered notions about what the patriarchal society expects from them: women to behave passively and men to adopt authoritarian positions. These positions have most possibly been influenced by the patriarchal attitudes exhibited by their families and their environment, which we have already commented.

Thus, Maureen's and Jules's personalities are constructed upon opposite traits even from their childhood, as Bender notices: Jules is jealous of his sister's "slow, stubborn, passive power" (*them* 70), while Maureen envies Jules's autonomy, mastery and creativity (Bender 41). Thus, since he is a baby, Jules is described as imaginative, noisy, full of energy and fretfulness; while Maureen is a quiet child who does not cause problems. At school, Maureen is a diligent and responsible student, almost to an obsessive level (she gets terribly upset upon losing the secretary's minutes book she is in charge of); whereas Jules often misbehaves (he slaps children who do not obey him and commits occasional thefts), disobeys the rules and, in the end, gets expelled from their catholic school and starts attending a public one. Jules attitude can be explained to a certain extent by his belief in his exceptionalism. According to Paul, this ideology can be found in several forms and discourses through the history of the United States. It has been frequently used to justify American hegemony, and it conveys notions of predestination and uniqueness. Despite combining very different components, this ideology consists of three main recurrent traits: religious exceptionalism, political exceptionalism and economic exceptionalism; three dimensions that support notions of religiosity, patriotism and individualism (15).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> First, the Puritan rhetoric of the Promised Land can be considered the origin of the American exceptionalism: the first generation of New England settlers considered that they had an especial destiny as God's chosen people. This belief has been persistent through the history of the country and has undergone secular and semi-secular variations. Second, the political exceptionalism is reflected in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, among others; who reflect the exceptionalism discourse surrounding the political founding of the American republic. Third, the dimension of the economic exceptionalism is often associated with notions of a new kind of individualism that corresponds,

Jules belief in his uniqueness prompts him to focus upon the future, and to be hopeful about its endless possibilities: “All his life he would close his eyes upon a landscape of absolute distance, luring him forward as if he were tottering on the brink of a perpetual delirium, a child still trapped inside his adult’s bones” (*them* 67). In time, his eagerness and restlessness will be translated in a yearn for travelling to the West to make a fortune: thus, both for him and Maureen, money becomes the key to success (as the exceptionalism doctrine claims too).

While reflecting on his father’s defeat, Jules understands that it had an economic basis: he considers that he was destroyed by the industrial machine of Detroit, crushed to death in an industrial accident. Certainly, after contemplating his father’s constant financial problems, Jules concludes that money is the key to success and happiness, a conviction that he shares with most of the members of his social circle and family; and that he inadvertently passes this notion onto his sister, proving that siblings are a powerful influence for one another.

In spite of this, as Friedman affirms, Jules is a romantic: he is not simply motivated by material gain, but by the hope of transcendence through optimism and adventure (*Joyce* 80). Jules incarnates a series of romantic figures: the man helplessly in love, the idealist who believes in human communion, the wanderer and the outlaw while he travels with Nadine, the political radical due to his relationship with the counterculture, and an adventurer and fortune-seeker when travelling to California at the end. In contrast with Jules’s endless spirit for transformation, Maureen becomes trapped in the contrasting patriarchal female roles of prostitute, and, later on, mother/wife. She feels that she has a more limited range of options for the future than her brother.

According to Creighton, Jules has inherited his belief in the uniqueness of the self from his mother Loretta, and shares it with his sister Maureen, but both siblings have antithetical attitudes toward this: to Maureen, it is an unbearable burden and an enclosure; to Jules, a source of an inexplicable joy and freedom (*Joyce* 66). Jules thus is

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and exceeds, the sphere of the political. It also emphasizes self-interest as both legitimate and necessary for the well-being of the body politic. Thus, American exceptionalism is perceived as a precondition for individual success, which is basically understood in economic terms (Paul 15-16).

completely enthusiastic about what life might bring, even if his experiences are painful. He considers himself “a spirit struggling to break free of the morass of the flesh [j ] struggling with the fleshy earth, the very force of gravity, death” (*them* 258). The reference to the spirit (which later on, he will call “the spirit of the Lord”) hints at Jules’s strength and adaptability: as he had asserted, he is able to transform himself to fit into any situation; and in fact, the novel shows how he adopts diverse roles according to every situation he lives. In contrast, his sister Maureen is afraid of things to come, because she cannot keep up with the “geography of change” of her life (*them* 142). She also fears the possibility of encountering and suffering violence (which she eventually does). Consequently, while Jules strengthens up against the pain of life and refuses to cry, Maureen is cautious, fears the presence of danger around every corner she turns, and is ready to “recoil [j] and start to cry as soon as possible” when confronted with the blows of life (*them* 121).

Jules’s and Maureen’s life attitudes also find expression in their relationships to other people. As noted by Creighton, while Maureen seeks the protective isolation of the self, Jules looks for union with others (*Joyce* 67). Indeed, Jules searches for meaning in his lover Nadine Green, whereas his sister marries her teacher as a means of escaping from her social class.

The opposite personalities of the siblings are also perceived in their particular relationship with violence, a question that plays a central role in their lives. As Giles mentions, violence follows Jules since he is conceived (his possible biological father is murdered after conceiving him): years later, he finally finds catharsis by killing a policeman (173). Indeed, Jules is fascinated by and drawn to violence and destruction from a young age when he sees a plane crash. In time, he experiences violence from two opposite perspectives: he is both a perpetrator of violence (committing forceful muggings, shooting the policeman) and a victim (he is sexually abused as a child and shot as an adult). Moreover, when as a child he is involved in an argument with other children, his grandmother encourages him to physically fight them (his mother, on the contrary, reprimands him), proving that, at times, violence in men is promoted from early contexts. Generally speaking,

Jules embraces violence on many occasions and suffers from it too. In contrast, Maureen tries to escape from the violence of the streets, but cannot avoid being beaten by her stepfather at home.

Violence holds a special relationship not only with Jules and Maureen but also with the city of Detroit:

Of the effort the spirit makes, this is the subject of Jules's story; of its effort to achieve freedom, its breaking out into beauty, in patches perhaps but beauty anyway, and of Jules as an American youth—these are some of the struggles he would have thought worth recording [in an imaginary book about his life]. All of Detroit is melodrama, and most lives in Detroit fated to be melodramatic, but Jules fate was to fall again and again into astonishing shrill spaces of craziness, all of it overdone physically and aborted spiritually, but somehow logical. (*them* 258)

Jules is thus explicitly depicted as a representation of American young people, who during the 1960s were immersed in social protests, such as the Vietnam War demonstrations. Jules indefatigable spirit is embodied in Detroit itself: like the city, Jules experiences great troubles and miseries but always overcomes them. The events of his life are unpredictably hectic, but in the end, he survives by never giving up.

Just as Detroit, Jules also has a strong bond with fire, which is a symbol of his attraction to violence. This attachment is modelled by two childhood episodes that make a deep impression upon him. First, his mother takes him and his sisters to see a crashed plane: Jules sees one of the destroyed corpses and is terribly impressed and frightened. Second, as a toddler, he sets a barn on fire while playing, and is “lost in a sudden reverence for its power” (*them* 71) while contemplating the flames. He also learns that once a fire spreads, it cannot easily be contained, as in the case of the violence of the Detroit riots he will experience as an adult.

At the age of fifteen years old, Jules learns the symbolic implications of fire in a magazine article where the Hindu mystic Vinoba Bhave, advocate of nonviolence and human rights (1895-1982), asserts: “We are all members of a single human family [j] My object

is to transform the whole of society. Fire merely burns] Fire burns and does its duty. It is for others to do theirs" (*them* 98). In Grant's opinion, Bhave's refrain hints to the image of a phoenix: the city can be purged by fire only if it will rise from its ruins as a new city with a new life (71). The article awakens Jules's idealism: impressed by Bhave's words, he decides "to live a secular life parallel to a sacred life—a modern life, at all costs—to expand Jules out of the limits of his skin and the range of his eyesight. [j] He could believe in fire and in himself. He would too do his duty" (*them* 98-99). Jules comes to believe that we are all members of a single family, but he has a particular manner of understanding this: while he does attribute a function and a duty to each member of society, these duties are not necessarily based upon solidarity toward others, but are many times motivated by uncontrollable forces like violence, since this doctrine urges people to be true to themselves. Jules's focus is on survival, not guilt or responsibility to others: he himself will overcome much misery. Similarly, Maureen does consider the bonds among human beings so relevant: she is mostly focused on her own life and future.

### **5.5.2 Maureen's and Jules' Dreams for the Future**

Maureen's and Jules's strategies to confront life resemble those of their mother Loretta, as Friedman argues by drawing similarities and differences among these three characters. Friedman remarks that Loretta, Jules and Maureen seek liberation through an alternate romantic method of creating a future self that will triumph over the present. Loretta, like Jules, believes in the potentiality of the future; but unlike him, she wishes for an ordinary life. Like Loretta and Jules, Maureen also believes that anything can happen, that the future is full of possibilities; but in her case this is associated with undesirable unpredictability, and places her into the position of a victim (*Joyce* 85,87). Maureen is the more realistic and pragmatic of the three, but still she makes use of a romantic mode of creating reality when she constructs a future based on pulp magazine romances.

Jules's and Maureen's dreams for the future are shaped by their general life attitudes: Grant argues that Maureen's love for stability and Jules's love for adventures are manifested in their appeal for libraries

and cars, respectively. Maureen is fascinated with the order of the library: this building becomes a shelter for her, a place of peace and control, a respite from her daily life, a space where she can find the order she craves for. Unlike Maureen, Jules looks for adventure instead of tranquility. The car gives him a sense of control, and also of history, time, and lineage. Maureen looks for a sense of history in the library, and Jules, in his car (107-108).

Books certainly allow Maureen to flee from ordinary life, and to find consolation through catharsis by contemplating the sufferings of the characters in novels. The library thus becomes the comforting home that Maureen cannot find in her real house. Jules also yearns to escape from his home (especially when his family's problems become a burden he cannot solve or even consider); but unlike Maureen, he does not want to confine himself, so he uses his car as a means of exploring the possibilities that America offers him. Maureen, in contrast, takes refuge for the instability of her life in the fictionalized past of novels, and this gives her a sense of peace, while the car gives Jules a sense of history by allowing him to travel around the country as the first colonizers had done while invading the new continent. Jules's sense of history is highly romanticized, and filtered through the myth of the West, a land to which he dreams of travelling. In fact, Jules comes to believe in the Myth of the Frontier and its promise of a bright future.

Thus, as Karl argues, while the other siblings Betty and Randolph fade into the background of the novel, Jules remains in Maureen's consciousness as the representative of the opportunity to escape (115-116). Certainly, Jules is the one to give Maureen the idea of escaping her house by means of earning her own money. He represents a model of freedom that she tries to emulate, although her concrete goals are completely different

Consequently, the dreams of both siblings involve moving, not only up the social scale, but also horizontally. As Grant concludes, Jules's romantic dreams of escaping to the West are paralleled by Maureen's yearning for a home in the suburbs (71). But Maureen finds greater difficulties in achieving independence, especially due to the constraints she finds when constructing her identity as a woman, since she learns to depend on men instead of acquiring her own autonomy.

Her family is also a source of limitations for her: her mother even forbids her to get a job. She fantasizes about living alone in the house; or that her whole family would die; or about hiding under the veranda and “let her mind go quiet and blank, give herself a good rest so that she could get her life straightened out” (*them* 123).

As anticipated, the novels in the Wonderland Quartet deal with a male imagination and consciousness seeking to liberate itself from certain confinements, but Jules is more resourceful and sympathetic than Swan or Richard. Partly because he is male (Johnson probably refers here to the wider range of options that Jules is given as a man) and because he is more imaginative, Jules deals more effectively than his mother and his sister Maureen with the soul-destroying forces of Detroit. He faces his life and future in the manner of a romantic hero, perhaps because he is an idealist. And he becomes the embodiment of Detroit and the violent contradictions of America (he is both a killer and a hero, as Oates has said). Ironically, Jules possesses the daring and charismatic nature that, in a different social setting, would have guaranteed his success in American society. But his childhood energy and mischief are disproved by various sources of authority like the nuns at school. Jules, restless and emotionally hungry, tries to break free from social constraints by claiming the figure of a heroic outlaw, setting out to conquer the world. He starts dreaming of “sliding out” from under his family (but in the end he shall remain more attached to them than his sister Maureen), becoming rich and moving to the West. Thus, Jules romanticizes his future in Hollywood terms: money, women, fast cars (Johnson *Understanding* 10, 74, 81-85), and he imagines himself as a movie character played by a famous actor. Jules thus believes in the myth of fortune awaiting him in the West (specifically, California). This belief constitutes the Myth of the Frontier.

Jules tries to find fortune by leaving his house and later on by travelling around the country, first around the South with Nadine, and later on heading to California in the West. This represents the element of separation which according to Slotkin constitutes the first phase in the repeated cycles of separation and regression necessary to improve one’s fortune in the mythical narratives associated to the Myth of the Frontier and the process of colonial development in North America (10-



11):<sup>43</sup> Jules needs this independence in order to achieve his goals without having to worry about his family. During this period, Jules embodies the romantic figure of the wanderer: he is restlessly seeking fortune and adventures, at the side of his lover.

The mythical element of regression is provided by Jules's vision of the West as "a wilderness [j] a golden sky, or perhaps a golden field of wheatj mountainsj ri versj s omething unmapped" (*them* 95-96). His perception of the Frontier is the most common one: he sees it as an unexplored and rough land full of promises and wealth. Specifically, the metaphor at work for him here is the vision of a bucolic and fertile countryside which he associates with the farm of his childhood, possibly due to the sense of freedom he used to enjoy there. His assessment of the West thus implies two kinds of regression: first, the sentimentalized regression to his own childhood; and second, the regression to a primitive and pure land in the West. In this case, this primitive state is associated with violence, since Jules and Nadine survive thanks to his aggressive robberies. Thus, he embodies two romantic figures at the same time: the wanderer and the outlaw.

Jules then believes in the endless possibilities that await for him in the West, where, according to him, "the future of America lay, waiting for people like him. He could change his name. He could change his looks in five minutes. He could change himself to fit into anything" (*them* 102). His conviction reveals his belief in his own exceptionality which we have already commented on; and this proves how the Myth

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<sup>43</sup> A myth expresses ideology in a narrative form, and has a metaphorical and suggestive language. The identification of myths with tradition makes them seem products of "nature," instead of the product of human thought and labor that they actually are (Slotkin 5-6). They can be perceived as the prime discursive form of an ideology (Paul 17). Slotkin provides a detailed introduction to the Myth of the Frontier, which is the United States' oldest and most characteristic myth. The original ideological task of the myth was to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies. According to him, Euro-American history begins with the self-selection and abstraction of certain European communities from their metropolitan culture, and their transplantation to a wilderness on another continent where conditions were generally more primitive than those at home. In turn, the colonies were expanded by reproducing themselves in subcolonial settlements, placed at some distance from the colonial metropolis and into a further primitive wilderness. Thus, the processes of development in colonies were associated to narratives in which repeated cycles of separation and regression were necessary to the improvement of fortune (Slotkin 10-11).

of the Frontier and the belief in American exceptionalism are closely connected. This uniqueness is precisely the element that grants Jules access to a set of unlimited options, in this case, the set of romantic roles we have alluded to.

As mentioned, during his search, Jules will not hesitate to use violence; and again, this is closely linked to the Myth of the Frontier. As Slotkin affirms, conflict and violence were central to these narratives: the Myth of the Frontier associates “progress” with scenarios of violent action (11).<sup>44</sup> Jules believes himself justified in exerting violence in certain situations, the most relevant example of regeneration through violence occurring during the 1967 Detroit riots, when Jules is awakened from his apathetic state by killing a policeman: he is regenerated to his previous hopeful state by means of violence. Thus, violence becomes here a means of purification instead of moral/inner corruption. The myths of regeneration through violence were also developed during the initial colonial stages in genres of personal narrative such as, for instance, the captivity narratives (Slotkin 14).

After Jules leaves home and starts to distance himself from the family, Maureen becomes curious (and envious) about his activities and whereabouts, and greatly misses him. She has looked for protection and comprehension in him, but then Jules, too busy with his own life, introduces money into their relationship as a replacement for attention. This causes a definite distance between them. This episode also marks the creation of a stiffer bond in their subsystem.

Maureen yearns for a freedom that her male sibling has attained rather easily: Jules’s job allows him to live on his own, whereas she is not allowed to get a job. Maureen then turns first to prostitution and then to becoming a wife and to the institution of motherhood as a means

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<sup>44</sup> The definition of “progress” varied: for Puritan colonists, it was associated with spiritual regeneration by means of the frontier adventure; Jeffersonians (and later on, the disciples of Frederick Jackson Turner, the author of the so-called “Frontier Thesis” in the 1890s, exposed in his address “The significance of the Frontier in American History,” which became the basis of the dominant school of American historical interpretation) perceived the frontier settlement as a re-enactment and renewal of the original “social contract;” Jacksonian Americans saw it as a means of regeneration of personal fortunes and/or patriotic virtue. In all of these cases, the myth embodied the redemption of the American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by undergoing a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or “natural” state and regeneration through violence (Slotkin 11-12).

to attain her goals of escaping her social class. Maureen is influenced by the notion of the “Madonna-prostitute,” that is, the traditional view of sex roles that dictates that men can be sexually permissive, while socially acceptable women cannot. This view leads to a perceived distinction between “good girls” (Madonnas) and “bad girls” (prostitutes). No such distinction is applied to men (Sauber et al. 240). Thus, the ways in which the two siblings try to gain independence are cruelly modelled by gender stereotypes: while he turns to the labor market to gain independence, Maureen dreads being ultimately confined to the domestic sphere since her options are reduced to the choice between being a prostitute or a mother/wife:

[s]he did not want to live with a man, sleep with a man. It made her angry to think of a future in which she waited in an apartment for a man to come back from whatever it was men did, all those hours spent with other men somewhere, talking about something, swearing and laughing angrily [...]. When they were together, men talked of things that could not be told to women. (*them* 173)

While Jules is freely earning money, enjoying his freedom and his sexuality, Maureen is forced to take care of the house and reduced to see prostitution as the only viable manner to earn money as a young girl. As a consequence, Maureen develops an acute dislike of sex that contrasts with her brother’s enjoyment of it.

Jules has a series of jobs and lovers. He keeps earning increasingly higher salaries with each different job, but his activities are mostly illegal: he is the chauffeur and assistant of the gangster Bernard Geffen, and later on a robber, a pimp, etc. Jules is thus “succeeding,” but his ascension represents a kind of dark and sordid American dream. He is not really ascending in a social sense, because he does not earn enough money to legitimize a high position in society that compensates for his illicit jobs.

In summary, we confirm Johnson’s assertion that the lives of these siblings are dictated by gender restrictions and expectations: Maureen uses sex and Jules uses violence as means to obtain power and self-definition (*Invisible* 166).

Jules passionately loves a series of girls and women, unlike Maureen, who has never been in love nor does she understand such feeling. The majority of Jules's love-objects are highly idealized by him and unreachable in some way: his teacher sister Mary Jerome; Edith Kamensky, a schoolgirl who does not belong to his group of friends and fears him; a cold woman with a complicated emotional life called Faye; and the apparently frigid Nadine Greene.

Creighton finds another common trait among these characters: Jules's Gatsby-like love-objects show his fascination with the oppressor class: the nun, his classmate Edith, Nadine. Most importantly, all of them resemble his sister: sister Jerome shares Maureen's repressed terror, Edith her compulsive orderliness, and Nadine her reluctance to sex (*Joyce* 67). This proves that Maureen has become a model for Jules's lovers, because he unconsciously falls in love with women that resemble her, that is, who are generally rather passive. As Creighton argues (*Joyce* 67), this unconscious desire of Jules for women like his sister may derive from his desire to identify with the totality of the human experience, to commune with "his other, darker self, his sister" (*them* 251). According to Waller, Jules's dreams are embodied by women (Maureen, the nun, Nadine) who eventually fail to meet his idealistic views (the nun loses his temper, Maureen prostitutes herself, Nadine abandons him), but who still draw out of him his imaginative of life. In this respect, Jules might be compared to Gatsby: like him, he searches for the glamor and the beauty of women; and he submits to violence and corruption to win the love of a woman, and to find the "frontier" he feels must exist beyond Detroit and which he identifies as California (*Dreaming* 137, 140).

Both Jules and Maureen, then, dream of abandoning their social class and accessing a better neighborhood. In Jules, this desire is manifested by his attraction to Nadine. Love is one of Jules's greatest motivations and drives, and Nadine Greene is his greatest love in the novel. Nadine is a spoiled but unsatisfied princess-like girl who has had little contact with the world and feels totally disconnected from reality: "Anything could happen to me and I wouldn't know it. [j] I feel so far from everything" (*them* 264). Her imprisonment is not physical but

emotional: she feels so alienated by her lifestyle and so separated from her family that she has run away from home several times.

Nadine lives in an upper-class neighborhood of Detroit, Grosse Pointe. This neighborhood is fascinating to Jules, who, used to the constant violence of the slums, marvels about its lack of serious crime. Part of Nadine's appeal for Jules is precisely her belonging to that class to which he would like to access: "if he had fallen in love with [Nadine], he had fallen in love with all the nieces and daughters of the Pointes, those fair-skinned, thoughtful girls with their shining clean hair" (*them* 250). Jules's idealism, ambition and inclination for beauty are blatant here: he is associating these girls with unreachable princesses locked in towers, an image that Oates specifically links to Nadine (qtd. in Daly 59). On her part, Maureen is also fascinated with the upper class, and even more eager and desperate to gain access to it than her brother Jules: she wishes to flee from her impoverished class at almost any cost.

As Creighton argues, Maureen and Nadine hold many similarities. According to her, both women are mirror images physically and emotionally, despite being at opposite sides of the social scale: they both state their wish to live a simple and uncomplicated life, but find themselves oppressed by the emptiness of their lives. They seem to be waiting for a man to give shape to their lives (*Joyce* 69). This image of a woman waiting for a man was seen as well in the teenager Clara perpetually waiting for Lowry in *Garden*.

Both women are passive, then. In fact, Jules consciously associates both Nadine and Maureen (whose names, perhaps not coincidentally, rhyme) by visualizing their frailty and their lack of control over their own lives as their "drifting somewhere with the pull of a river's gravity, dragging them miserably downstream" (*them* 270). The image of a woman being swept away by the river brings to mind Cressida's jump to the river in *Carthage*. Moreover, the image of the river's gravity is a clear allusion to the deterministic forces against which Maureen tries to fight by constructing her own future.

These three women lose control of their lives (sometimes due to the actions of male characters over them) at some point, with terrible consequences: Maureen falls into a kind of coma, Nadine is coaxed by Jules into having a relationship with him and eventually shoots him, and

Cressida disappears from her hometown while her sister's ex-fiancé is accused of her murder. However, Creighton points out, the forces that constrict Nadine are psychological, not sociological: inner, instead of outer (*Joyce* 72). Certainly, in the security and tranquility of Grosse Pointe, Nadine has all the class advantages that Maureen dreams of; but she cannot overcome her inner insecurities about her body and her relationship to others, especially men.

Besides, both Nadine and Maureen are terrified of sex but nonetheless consent to have relationships with men: Maureen accepts for money, and Nadine consents because she wants to become a normal adult woman under patriarchal standards, which requires a relationship with a man. Jules is apparently madly in love with Nadine, and obsessed about finding transcendence by means of her body, but this is almost impossible due to Nadine's revulsion for sex.

Nadine unexpectedly asks Jules to run away with her from a neighborhood in which both Jules and Maureen would like to live. Jules accepts her proposal, since it represents the onset of a new romantic episode for him, in which he incarnates the wanderer and the outlaw. But their runaway journey is more difficult and less idealistic than expected: driving long hours is exhausting, they do not have money, and their relationship is not very rewarding. As Daly notices, this romantic plot gives Jules a sense of freedom, but this freedom only leads him to dead ends, as it occurs with Nadine. Jules presents himself to her as a romantic suitor, but for her, this plot romance is oppressive and requires a form of self-annihilation, because it defines men as subjects and women as objects who only exist for men (42).

But Jules continues to envision himself as a hero, Daly argues: the protagonist of his story (42). This is an interesting point of divergence from his sister: Maureen cannot perceive herself as the protagonist (and much less the heroine) of her own life, and thus depends on other male characters to attain her dream of escaping from her family: first, her clients, and then, a husband. Once more, we see how Oates's early female protagonists do not claim power in her own name, but by means of men.

While travelling around Texas with Nadine, Jules becomes seriously ill. Nadine, overwhelmed and terrified by his state, eventually

abandons him at a motel, taking the car with her, which deprives Jules of his beloved tool of control, leaving him completely helpless. This again finds a parallel with Maureen's life: as Jules lies sick, Maureen is trapped within her comatose condition. Even separated, the siblings have similar experiences, since Jules has been betrayed by the love-object of his romantic adventure, whereas Maureen's attempt to flee her environment has been violently frustrated after Furlong assaults her. Consequently, both of them have been betrayed by people supposed to care for them; or at least not to harm them on purpose: Nadine and Furlong.

Jules recovers sooner than Maureen, who lays in bed for several months. During this period of time, she experiences flashbacks about her time working as a prostitute. They are, specifically, visualizations of the semen of her clients "easing out of her body [j] There is so much of it, like a flow of blood, endless. She is paralyzed by it" (*them* 298). The semen will come to represent the threat of a stranger potentially able to hurt her. She visualizes men as a threat, a conception that is commonly infused in women: representing women as subjected to the random violence of male strangers is a classical method to limit their space to the domestic sphere, and to reduce their capacity of movement. But as seen throughout the corpus, violence is commonly found at home, not at the hands of a random stranger on the street, and this is precisely Maureen's case.

Thus, Creighton observes (*Joyce* 69), Maureen only finds escape in fantasy, never through emotions. Before, she had dissociated herself from intercourse to the point of not seeing the man's face. The fantasy that Creighton refers to involves Maureen's split into two halves. Like many other characters in the corpus, such as Jesse/Dr. Vogel and Aaron/Krull, Maureen splits herself in two in order to face a time of crisis. Maureen's split is not so prominent or durable as in the case of other characters, but the phenomenon is still worth examining. These characters form doppelgänger that belong to Miyoshi's formal category, since they are directly connected to the content of the novels, in this case, the internal conflicts and self-division of the characters.

Maureen creates this dissociation when dealing with the trauma of Furlong's assault, during her comatose condition. She envisions two

Maureens: one is her actual lethargic self, confined to a bed; and the other one is a self she would prefer not to consider: she sees it fleetingly, reflected in windows and mirrors. This reflection escapes from her and walks free, and the lethargic Maureen is terrified of it but also yearns to join it and “*get loose, scream with the pain and terror of getting loose*” (*them* 209, emphasis in the original). Thus, this reflected self expresses all the emotions that lie hidden within Maureen’s hibernating self, namely, rage and fear. She experiences freedom as dangerous: this vivid self is able to attract men in the street, just as Maureen used to do; and this involves a potential risk. Unlike her, the zombie-like Maureen, described as heavy and dead, is safe from the threat of the unknown, and from the memory of her past experiences.

Like Maureen, female characters in Oates’s early novels pay a great price for survival (*Creighton Novels Middle* 75). Karen’s lover from *Shuddering* is killed in a car race, Clara Walpole in *Garden* loses her son and husband, and Shelley in the revised version of *Wonderland* contracts a severe disease. The novel *Do with Me* is the first to present a more positive destiny for a female protagonist: Elena Howe eventually acquires an identity of her own, looking at herself through her own eyes instead of the eyes of men. Oates’s middle-years novels, Creighton observes, present an easier survival for women. For instance, Marya from *Marya* survives by hardening herself. Enid from *Must* seems to have even more chances of survival than Marya: she has enjoyed through sexuality without being fatally punished, and perhaps has even integrated the dualities of her being (*Novels Middle* 75). In *Mulvaney’s*, *Bird* and *Carthage*, Marianne, Krista and Cressida also survive, after enduring diverse hardships. In *them*, Maureen and Loretta represent two kinds of survival, Johnson asserts. Loretta survives by giving herself up to the constant and violent flux of life and becoming resilient and tough in the process; and Maureen hardens herself against her environment and against other people in order to avoid further suffering (*Understanding* 81).

Jules’s letters have a central role in Maureen’s recovery: he is assisting Maureen and cooperating with her even if they are miles away. It is him, the most important person of her life, the one who makes her get up, even from miles away: first, by providing her with a vivid bond



to reality by means of his mostly cheerful letters; and second, by making her get out of bed on her own volition to try to find out if there is a letter from him in the mail.

### **5.5.3 Maureen's and Jules's Reintegration to Life**

After Nadine abandons him, Jules tries to maintain his faith in himself: he argues that he does not pray to God, but to himself. He also reflects that “the spirit of the Lord” lives in everyone, allowing people to form connections and love each other. Jules does not use these words in a traditional religious sense (he does not believe in God), but in a spiritual and mystical one, following the teachings of Vinoba Bhawe. The spirit of the Lord also represents the capacity for endless possibilities, which is present in Jules, as well as the fortitude necessary to address them. Unlike him, Maureen only conceives her future as a limited set of options.

This communal spirit could easily be based on Oates's appeal for Jungian beliefs. As Creighton points out, similarly to Jung, Oates recognizes the universal communality in human experience, and especially in the American experience. She also shares with Jung a tremendous respect for the dark other within the self (*Novels Middle* 10). Oates's work, thus, revolves to a great extent around these two notions of communality and duality, and we see numerous examples of them in the corpus.

After Maureen gets up, she attempts to construct an autonomous life by working as a typist (a typical female job) and enrolls in some courses at the University of Detroit, where she meets Miss Oates in a literature class. But her plans are not very successful: she fails the course and drops out. At this point, she has been reintegrated in society but still keeps a detached relationship with her family, possibly motivated by their general disinterest previous to Furlong's attack. She feels mostly alone, and needs to reassess her life and to plan another viable future that allows her to flee her impoverished neighborhood. She designs a strategy heavily based on gender stereotypes, and, lacking someone to confide in, narrates it in a series of letters to her teacher Miss Oates. This entails a drastic change in the novel's focalization:

Maureen thus becomes the first-person narrator of the letters for a few chapters.

The function of Maureen's letters, Giles explains (165), is to interrupt the narrative in order to explore the interrelationship between art, reality and the imagination and to confront the traditional questions about the viability of naturalistic fiction. As previously commented, *them* is a critique on naturalistic fiction that employs some of its conventions with the intention to subvert them. One of the central concepts of naturalism is determinism, as well as the flux of life. The letters express Maureen's wish to take her destiny into her own hands, and thus fight the forces of determinism.

The first naturalistic trait, as Creighton notices, is the author's inaugural note proclaiming that this is a work of history in a fictionalized form based on Oates's experiences as a teacher in Detroit; and the second one is the inclusion of Maureen's letters. But Oates has warned that it is mock-naturalism; that the note and letters are totally fictitious, and that the narrator should not be confused with the author. In fact, naturalistic novels portray the defeat of the characters, but in the case of Oates's *them*, the characters succeed (*Joyce* 65). Thus, these strategies represent incisive philosophical and metafictional portraits in the novel that challenge the premises of naturalism (Araújo 404).<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, Daly explains, Oates creates the character of "Miss Oates" to parody the naturalistic convention of a distanced, ironic author. According to this convention, the author is situated above the social reality he records, at a distance that prevents him from having sympathy for his characters. But Oates uses the "Author's Note" to highlight her sympathy toward the characters by, for instance, pointing to certain similarities between Maureen and herself, such as their having been born to working-class families and loving to read (Daly 24-25).

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<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Bender argues that the interruption of the letters is a challenge to the authorial voice, and demonstrates the fine membrane between fiction and fact. In *Expensive*, Nada's story "The Molesters" also represents a narrative break which makes Richard feel overcome by its power, although he struggles to misread it and make it his own (44). In Oates's subsequent works, the alterations in perspective become far more common, as seen in the novel *Childwold*, presented by five different focalizers. Similarly, diverse narrative modes and strategies became common, as seen in the novel *My Sister, My Love*, which includes a first-person narration, journal entries, letters, newspaper articles, etc.

Maureen writes the letters to organize and comprehend the muddled events of her life. This function of narratives as tools of reminiscence and understanding is common in the corpus: narrators like Richard from *Expensive*, Judd from *Mulvaney's*, and Krista from *Bird* arrange the events of their past in order to bring some logic and cohesion to them, and in order to reconcile with former traumas and obtain a new, more informed perspective over the past. The potential dangers of writing these narratives is that sometimes, they lead to a confusion between reality and fiction that is damaging for the characters: they forget their lives because they favor these fictions, and thus, they stop being persons and are transformed into characters, as seen in *Expensive*.

In general, Maureen's tone toward Miss Oates is resentful: she reproaches her not only the unreality of the novels she teaches (Maureen proclaims to have forsaken literature as a source of comfort), but also her way of teaching (speaking too fast, not clarifying the corrections of her assignments), the poor grades she gives Maureen despite her efforts (which cause her to drop out), and, especially, the numerous comforts that she, unlike Maureen, enjoys. Maureen even states that she hates neither her former clients nor Furlong: she hates Miss Oates. Perhaps, more than expressing her jealousy, she is transferring her hatred and mistrust of men to a woman she considers "inappropriate," voicing the views of a still rather sexist society that regards women's careers as non-desirable or threatening. Most possibly, Maureen is simply resentful that she has not obtained more assistance from her teacher.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> In Oates's short story "In the Region of Ice" (collected in *Wheel*), we also find a distraught student, Allen Weinstein, reaching out for his teacher, sister Irene: in this case, he explicitly asks for emotional support, unlike Maureen. However, sister Irene refuses because she is afraid of entering a human relation with him. At this respect, her aloofness resembles that of Maureen. When Allen commits suicide, sister Irene convinces herself that she has no responsibility whatsoever over his death, since she would have been unable to meet his expectations. Considering that she only has one existence, she confirms her dedication to her faith. Her religious option, Norman concludes, gives her reprieve from guilt and individual responsibility, but it also deprives her of the vitality of reality (92). As Friedman explains, sister Irene's rejection of human interaction is rooted upon her submission to the pressures of self-survival, favoring the anonymity of ordinary choices to the possibility of self-obliteration. To extend any part of herself to Allen would imply passing into another, unknown self; and sister Irene is drawn to ordinary, not heroic proportions (*Joyce* 17). At this respect, sister Irene resembles Maureen, who also retreats in the ordinary and who detaches herself from intimate relationships

Despite her defying words, Maureen finds connections between her and Miss Oates, as she admits. This is precisely one of the main themes of the *Wonderland Quartet*: the necessity of detecting the common traits in people from different social strata. This theme is expressed in *them* by defending the necessity of seeing the “us” in “them”. As mentioned, the recognition of the Other is an essential step in the process of forming an individual personality. In this case, both Miss Oates and Maureen have a common interest in literature, and besides, Maureen thinks that her instructor will understand her plans for marrying an already-married man: she considers that she would maybe appreciate this in aesthetical terms. Maureen also admires and envies Miss Oates’s relaxed behavior when relating to men, because Maureen is afraid of them.

Finally, and most importantly, Maureen reflects the core of her anxieties in the letters: she wonders whether she is doomed to be “Maureen Wendall” all of her life; that is, as Creighton phrases it, she wants to know “how does one be one’s self? [j] what is selfhood in an environment seemingly hostile to self-definition?” (*Joyce* 66). Maureen, ever-obsessed with stability, describes with horror how the world is ever-shifting and out of control. She thinks that it is impossible to learn who she is in those shifting and chaotic conditions.

While Maureen is working as a typist, Jules travels back to the north and starts working for his uncle Samson, in which he considers to be his first decent job ever. It seems that the two of them are adapting to a conventional life, a process that they assume in opposing manners: Maureen still feels haunted by her time as a prostitute; while Jules, on the contrary, does not have any sense of dread about his past actions or failures: his gaze is upon the future. But Jules has not forgotten Nadine; and one day he casually meets her. She is now married, living in Bloomfield Hills, in a house that reminds Jules of Nadine’s former family home at Grosse Pointe. This implies that Nadine is still trapped in the same tower, this time not under the control of her parents, but of her husband. Maureen will fit into a similar formula.

Nadine seems to have married as a way to validate herself as an adult woman: she married her husband “when it was time for [her] to

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moved by what she understands as self-preservation. Even if Maureen eventually marries, she does not have a close bond to her husband.

get married” (*them* 344-345). This relation seems to be devoid of meaning: it seems a mere step that she felt she had to take. As she says,

[a] woman is like a dream. Her life is a dream of waiting.  
[j] she lives in a dream, waiting for a man. There’s no way out of this, insulting as it is, no woman can escape it.  
[j] That man isn’t you, exactly. It’s what I need to do with you, in order to keep alive. I need you for myself, for my life. I need to love you. (*them* 347)

Thus, she is not totally interested in having such a relationship, but feels compelled to do so. It is to be inferred that she does not have a meaningful relationship with her husband either (she asserts that she feels extremely lonely), and so she turns to Jules as her last choice: she feels that she must sleep with him in order to finally overcome her fears. She is not totally disinterested about sex, though: a part of her wants to enjoy it, but, in general, she is terrified. Nadine is here echoing Helene, who had no interest in relating to men, or having sex and children, but being a female, she felt forced to do so. The reference to waiting also brings to mind Clara Walpole waiting for Lowry, in this case willingly, but still signaling the forceful dependence of women upon men.

Nadine and Jules sleep together but Jules is still unable to reach the communion with her that he had always wished for, and which he wishes to attain by penetrating her; and Nadine cannot find any satisfaction in their relationships. Later on, she accuses Jules of not really knowing her:

You love me but you don’t listen to me. You draw back from me. All your life you’ll take refuge in having been poor, having been kicked around, to make you superior to people like me. You don’t want to think that we’re real.  
[j] you don’t believe that I’m real. I’m something you made up, even my body is something you made up. (*them* 369)

Nadine reveals here the reason why Jules cannot connect with her: she is simply an image for him, a representation that he has created in his

mind instead of a real person. This is why the relationship is doomed to fail.

Jules dreams of flowing out and losing himself in Nadine, Daly argues (39); but she cannot allow this flow of passion, because, in Oates's words, she is still a prisoner in the tower of her father's ethic of the cold, locked-in ego, a state which dooms the girl to be frigid (Oates qtd. in Daly 39).<sup>47</sup> Later on, Nadine suddenly draws a gun and shoots Jules. According to Daly, Nadine resorts to violence when she cannot escape the paternal logos that is inscribed in her mind and body (40). In this respect, Nadine is challenging the male authority that has constrained her after she has unsuccessfully tried to submit to it. She appears to have turned her previously self-destructive drive (manifested by means of her fasting) upon her lover. On the contrary, Maureen tries to take some advantage of that dependence, similarly to Clara from *Garden*. Both Maureen and Clara gain access to more power, but in an indirect manner, by means of their husbands.

The shooting is the conclusion of the second part of the novel, which closes with the following sentence: "The spirit of the Lord departed from Jules" (*them* 381). As Daly notes, this sentence suggests that Jules has died; but he is alive, so that readers are forced to distinguish between spiritual and biological death. Maureen's sudden awakening after her comatose state has similar Lazarus-like qualities. As we shall see, both siblings experience death in life and both return from it (43, 45). Maureen awakens and tries to build up again the barriers of her self, while Jules is jolted out of his weariness by the Detroit riots (Creighton *Joyce* 64). As Daly notes, the title of part three, "Come, My Soul, That Hath Long Languished," emphasizes the fact that both siblings woke up from spiritual death, but their imaginations are at this point impoverished and their future uncertain (41). According to Friedman, by shooting Jules, Nadine kills his sense of himself as extraordinary; that is, the spirit of the Lord within him (Friedman *Joyce*

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<sup>47</sup> As Daly adds, this kind of perpetual virginity is also present in Karen from *Shuddering* and Sister Irene from "In the Region of Ice:" these women have internalized sexual passion as a fall, and this has an economic parallel: the falling of the upper-class daughter into dispossession by a lower-class son. Nadine remains psychologically a virgin after having intercourse because she remains self-contained and hermetically closed inside her father's image of the "good" daughter (39-40).

92). The departure of the spirit also ends, for some time, Jules's belief in the possibility of human communion, of all humanity being a whole family.

#### **5.5.4 The Role of the Counterculture in Jules and Maureen's Relationship. The Detroit Riots**

At the beginning of the last part of the novel, the narration turns once more to Maureen, who is now enacting her plan to marry her teacher Jim Randolph in order to fight the instability of life by constructing a domestic life in her own terms. Maureen literally asserts that she wants to fall in love with him. Placing intention in such an apparently spontaneous and uncontrollable emotional condition seems implausible and artificial; but it is important to remember, as Creighton points out, that Maureen is incapable of spontaneity (even as a child, she was afraid to make a mistake while playing) and never attempts to find satisfaction in sex (*Joyce* 66, 68). These are two of the reasons why she plans to fall in love with Jim. First, a calculated movement makes the apprehensive and restrained Maureen feel more secure. This sharply contrasts with her brother's affair with Nadine: he had loved her at first sight and impulsively ran away with her. Second, Oates has pointed out that Maureen is doomed to be frigid due to her past experience as a prostitute, when she has come to associate money with sex. In fact, as a young girl, she was astonished and repulsed to hear other girls talk about boys; and she could not understand why they would have sex with them without asking for money, because she herself could not regard sex as a relation other than economic. As a result, she feels more confident by rationally selecting a person than by yielding to uncontrollable forces of love or sexual attraction. Her plan is conceived by following narratives of romance extracted from popular culture: she thinks of it as a magazine story or the plot of a movie, proving the pervasive influence of literature upon her life, regardless what she has written to miss Oates.

Maureen used to love books and to consider them cathartic. As Giles explains, she valued literature as an escape from her sordid reality, and she kept on believing this even as she was prostituting. When Furlong beats her, he violently penetrates her ideal world and shows her

that any lasting escape from reality is pure fiction. After this, Maureen prefers reading newspapers, believing that if reality cannot be escaped, it must be known, and if possible, controlled (Giles 164). Thus, despite renouncing to literature and asserting that books are simply lies, she reassembles her life through literature (Bender 44), by resorting to plots of romantic and pulp fiction.

In fact, Maureen never shows much personal initiative. In this case, she simply follows the behavioral guidelines from the romance fiction of popular culture. As in the case of *Expensive* with Richard and Nada, we once more find a character, Maureen, trying to give shape to her life through fiction. This usually results in confusion or dissatisfaction, in this case especially perceived at the novel's ending, which reveals Maureen's insecurities.

Bender calls Maureen's plan "a pulp fiction escapade," by which Oates suggests that this character is falling into a restrictive and formulaic drama. At the beginning of the novel in 1937, we are introduced to the dreaming Loretta, who stands before a mirror, "in love." In April 1966, the "dreamer" is Maureen: she also stands before a mirror, in her case determined to fall in love. Despite the fact that she poses as the character in a story already written, Maureen's version is different from her mother's since it has a more deliberate quality: she tells herself that she "will make" her teacher fall in love with her (45). In fact, Maureen unconsciously conceives her plan as a pulp story: she imagines Jim as a detective who has to question her; and Jim himself imagines Maureen as the classical young female victim grisly murdered in such stories. She also uses these pulp fiction parameters to construct a fictitious narrative of her past to present to Jim: she tells him that her father had abandoned them to marry another woman. This can also serve, simultaneously, to encourage Jim to abandon his wife by presenting a similar situation: in fact, she tells him that it is a common occurrence.

Jules's life is also linked to pulp fiction. As Bender explains, like Richard Everett, Jules seems to have a certain gift for fabulation; and he sees himself as a character in a story written by himself, turning the craft of fiction into a metaphor for identity and control. Nonetheless, reality alters Jules's fiction, and makes him feel that he cannot actually



write his own story: then, he claims: “*My life is a story imagined by a madman!*” (*them* 258, emphasis in the original). Indeed, his life seems to reflect the craziness of a pulp fiction magazine he sees in a drugstore (Bender 41-42, 48): one of the magazine headlines reads: “My Baby’s Father Was Killed in My Arms!” (*them* 282), which ironically, is roughly what has happened to Jules’s possible biological father Bernie and his mother, Loretta. Interestingly, Jules is disgusted about the story.

This confusion between fiction and reality may be associated to determinism, and to the illusion of having control of one’s own life. Maureen and Jules, like Richard and Nada from *Expensive*, try to gain control of their lives by transforming it into a work of fiction. Thus, instead of living their lives, they write themselves as characters: Maureen turns herself into a pulp-romance heroine; Richard into a murderous and neglected child; Nada into a glamorous Russian exiled; and Jules into a series of romantic figures.

Besides, it is interesting to see how Maureen, who shows symptoms of matrophobia, is partially repeating the schemes that her mother has followed, which suggests how women are unconsciously imbued with specific desirable goals in their lives, and how romantic heterosexual love is presented to them as the key to uttermost happiness. Maureen associates the possibility of happiness to gaining security for her future through a traditional heterosexual marriage, and this is precisely the goal she tries to attain.

Meanwhile, Jules is said to have spent months in hospital recovering from Nadine’s shot. He is apathetic and disillusioned. He does not feel like his true self but is said to “lay asleep or dying, drained of himself” (*them* 448), which recalls again Maureen’s comatose state. For the first time, Jules is not living on his own job, but exploiting others: he has become the pimp of several women, among them a young girl called Vera, whom he physically and sexually abuses. For him, Vera is simply an object. After Nadine’s shooting, Jules is no longer the joyful man he was, but shares his stepfather Furlong’s brutality by beating Vera (Creighton *Joyce* 69).

In Daly’s words, the romantic code that idealizes love is gendered: a woman’s loss of innocence is regarded more harshly than a man’s. The double standard is perceived in the fact that it is right for Jules to

steal Nadine (whose passivity is considered virginal) from her family when he first meets her, or to liberate himself through violence, but when Maureen prostitutes herself or starts a relationship with a married man, she is considered a “whore” or a “fallen woman.” Oates tries to revise those unfair judgements (46). As Waller asserts, in the crude and sexist society of the American city, the new financial euphoria lets Jules indulge in the exploitation of which his sister became the victim (*Dreaming* 130).

Just as Furlong casts Maureen into catatonia, Nadine’s shooting casts Jules into aimless drifting (which again becomes a deterministic force), until he becomes a peripheral member of the counterculture around Wayne State University, Creighton argues (64 *Joyce*). Jules appears to be disillusioned with humanity: he has lost most of his previous compassion and empathy, and treats Vera cruelly. The people from the counterculture that Jules meets recognize their own privileged status:<sup>48</sup> most of them belong to wealthy neighborhoods or have higher education. They try, however, to sympathize and become blended with disfavored people:<sup>49</sup> Jules notices that most of them are “students who played at being poor, [j] [but] had good teeth; being poor stopped at teeth” (*them* 429). Ironically, these youngsters are trying to insert themselves into the poor class in order to make a political point or to rebel against the established rules, whereas Jules and Maureen are desperately trying to leave behind the working class and become members of the middle class. Vera, for instance, comes from the upper

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<sup>48</sup> For a time, after World War Two, students followed the lead of the veterans; but this changed in the 1960s. In college, the students had been trained by teachers who were, in general, New Deal liberals, and told them that the government should regulate the economy in the general interest and protect the liberties of all; but the students did not perceive that this was happening. These young people had all the comforts of modern life but felt insignificant and powerless, as well as guilty about their advantages. They thought that poverty was intolerable in such a rich country, and that racism was both stupid and evil (Garraty 859, 867).

<sup>49</sup> At the time, poverty was indeed escalating: Meredith refers to the Detroit of the time as “the nation’s poorest big city” (n. p.). There are two main reasons for this. First, technology was rapidly changing the labor market: educated workers could easily find well-paid jobs; those who did not have an education or special skills found it extremely difficult. Second, with the movement of the middle-class to the suburbs, poverty became less visible. Many poor people were becoming alienated from society since they usually lacked motivation and felt trapped by their position (Garraty 828), as seen in the figure of Howard Wendall.

class and is forced into prostitution by Jules after meeting him in the counterculture circles, which proves the sexism and abuses that this apparently idealistic culture sometimes concealed.

By means of his association with the counterculture, Jules adopts the romantic role of a radical, although he is not actually politically (or otherwise) interested in the counterculture. On the contrary, he is taking economic advantage of them. The reunions of these counterculture and anti-Vietnam groups are almost comical, and show that those who attend them are idealists with unrealistic, blurred and unclear goals: they cannot reach an agreement about anything. Although most of these people have a vast education and intelligent theoretical ideas, they lack real knowledge about how to carry out a revolution.

Jules's romance plot has crumbled with Nadine's attempt to kill him; but he has not forgotten her, although he has discovered, to his surprise, that a person can survive without love. Maureen, on her part, does not understand love at all, or love related to sex: she only understands sexual relationships based on economic interests, and not disinterested love. In fact, according to Johnson, by entering the circles of political radicalism, and drifting into the company of immature and self-glorifying "radicals," Jules is seeking redemption not in love but through violence (*Understanding* 87). More than redemption, however, it would appear that Jules is looking for his true self, and his lost optimism.

Eventually, racial tension explodes in the 1967 riots of Detroit. This is the novel's climax, which has a definitive impact over the Wendall siblings. Oates was living in Detroit when the riots took place; and despite being on holiday at the time of the riots, she and her husband were only a block away from the burning and looting ("Interview" *Joyce. Conversations 1970-2006*, 158). The riots had everlasting significance for Oates personal life and career, and they conditioned her vision of violence, since as she asserts, it was the first time she had lived a situation where her physical being was at risk: "You never forget it and as a writer you want to deal with it. It was not an easy time. Living in Detroit changed my life completely. I would be writing a different kind of work right now had I not been there" (Oates "Interview" *Joyce. Conversations 1970-2006*, 158).

Given the relevance of the revolts for Oates, they shall be examined by considering its impact upon the characters, because, as Grant accurately comments, in Oates, social violence often reflects individual violence: in *them*, the Detroit riots reflect on a wider scale the turbulent lives of the Wendalls (18). As Oates herself has explained, *them* is “history in fictional form” (qtd. in Grant 10).

The riots and its aftermath are described in the last three chapters of the novel: they constitute the climatic release through violence which is so common in Oates’s fiction, especially in her first works. In *them*, Jules is awakened and re-integrated to his former optimistic self by means of this violence. This process needs to be examined in the larger context of the 1967 riots. Detroit serves as an emblem of the wild and melodramatic energies that shaped America between 1936 and 1967, according to Johnson. Its riots are emblematic of the nation’s pervasive unrest.<sup>50</sup> In this city, Oates found the “vibrating field of other people’s experiences.” In this sense, Detroit represents a mythic force, “larger and more significant than the sum of its parts” (*Understanding* 75).

The novel *them* vividly describes how Jules goes out in the morning of Sunday, July 23, 1967, and witnesses the sirens wailing and the air

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<sup>50</sup> The year 1967 was the climax of a series of riots that had started in 1965 in urban ghettos in the north of the United States: there were riots in 128 cities. The riot of Detroit was caused by the racial tensions that forced the African-American population to live in a state of constant agitation during the mid-1960s. Some of the causes for the revolts were the long-contained anger at police brutality along with segregated housing and public schools, scarcity of city services scanty in most African-American neighborhoods, rampant unemployment, etc. Along with all these factors, the crime rate escalated. This state of affairs brought poverty, which Theoharis (n. p.) attributes to systematic inequality. Civil rights activist Rosa Parks (who lived for many years in Detroit) perceived the riot as “the result of resistance to change that was needed long beforehand” (qtd. in Theoharis n. p.). For her, the uprising was part of the long history of white resistance to civil rights demands, which had created hostility and bitterness among the younger people. The disturbances erupted in the early morning hours of Sunday, July 23, 1967, and lasted five days. They started when a group of policemen were attacked by onlookers while raiding at an after-hours drinking and gambling club. The city soon turned into a combat zone with arsonists, looters and snipers. The army was sent on Tuesday; and order was finally restored on Thursday. As a result of the revolts, forty-three people died (ten whites and thirty-three African-Americans, most of them at the hands of law enforcement) and 1,189 were injured. The official total of damage of the rioting was calculated at between \$287 million and \$323 million in 2016 dollars. Besides, the civil rights organization New Detroit Inc. was created after the revolt (Slotkin 535, McGraw n. p., Meredith n. p., Theoharis n. p., Brown n. p.). (For more information, see Johnson *Invisible* 102-103, 146, 149; Slotkin 536, 549-550, 553-554; “Uprising;” n. p. and Plamondon n. p.).

smelling of smoke while police cars and firetrucks rush in all directions, helicopters fly over the city, and soldiers march along the streets. Some policemen encourage the looting, while others beat people up. Staring in awe, Jules feels the heaviness and slowness of his own body, which betrays the passivity into which he has fallen, like his sister Maureen, who was drowsy and slow during her convalescence. Jules is carried away by the swarming people, who shove him from one place to another. He is being absorbed by violence and does not resist.

Gradually, Jules moves from being a witness into an active participant in the looting by stealing a carton of cigarettes. Jules then placidly contemplates how the fires spread: "Let everything burn! Why not? The city was coming to life in fire, and he, Jules, was sitting in it, warning to it, the flames dancing along his arteries and behind his seared eyes" (*them* 461). This experience reactivates Jules's dormant belief in the teachings of Vinoba Bhave, who argued that fire is a cleansing element by which we can be reborn. Similarly, the violence of the riots brings about Jules's rebirth, represented by the image of the fire burning like blood in his veins. Detroit, just like Jules, has always had a special relationship with fire: fires were common in the many old and wooden buildings of Detroit; and they were also a central aspect of the 1967 revolts, when hundreds of buildings were burnt (Theoharis n. p.).

Jules then comprehends that "the spirit of the Lord had not truly departed from him," and that the old Jules had not died but was simply "slumbering" (*them* 462): like Maureen, who has reinvented herself as a suburban mother and wife, he is being reborn now. The re-acquisition of the spirit of the Lord shall allow Jules to form connections to others again, and to love Nadine once more.

Amidst the chaos, a dying boy hands his rifle to Jules: he thus receives a weapon, an element of destruction which shall enable him to seal his rediscovery of himself and to put an end to the lingering frustrated memory of his late father. Suddenly, a policeman tries to attack Jules. They engage into a fight and Jules finally shoots the man to death. As Waller notices, Jules seems to descend into further violence, but we need to remember Oates's insistence, in an essay about Dostoyevsky, that violence is always an affirmation, since it is a

decisive act making possible, though not certain, a further growth. She notes that Dostoyevsky's novels, like her own, are built upon a long preparation, and then a decisive consummation of violence. Jules is submitting himself to the violence of the times, and yet he retains his essence (*Dreaming* 141-142). Certainly, this event will allow Jules to find himself again and retain his old dreams of finding a shining future in the West. He achieves this liberation by means of a fire weapon, which confirms his belief on the properties of fire as an element of rebirth. Creighton (70) agrees with Waller by remarking that Jules returns to himself through the riot, thus turning the destructive revolt into affirmative, because it arises out of passion instead of depression, and feeling instead of apathy. In sum, Jules' murderous act of killing a policeman is, ironically, a step toward selfhood (Creighton *Joyce* 70).

After the revolts, Jules is interviewed on television about the riots as the new associate of a sociology professor called Mort Piercy, one of his acquaintances from the counterculture who leads an antipoverty group. Jules expresses his belief in the necessity of destroying the former order so that a new order can be built. He is alluding to his cherished metaphor of fire burning and doing its duty, which he quotes, adding that

[v]iolence can't be singled out from an ordinary day! [j]  
Everyone must live through it again and again, there's no  
end to it, no land to get to, no clearing in the midst of the  
cities!—who wants park in the middle of the cities!—  
parks won't burn! [j] It won't hurt [j] The rapist and his  
victim rise up from rubble, eventually, at dawn, and brush  
themselves off and go down the street to a diner. Believe  
me, passion can't endure! It will come back again and  
again but it can't endure! (*them* 475)

Creighton comments that Jules is trying to articulate what the riot has helped him to clarify: instability and impermanence are part of the human experience; while order, stability and unity are ephemeral. But this fluidity and unpredictability are no reason for people to despair: on the contrary, they give them reason to rejoice by guaranteeing people that they are passionate beings and not entombed mummies (*Joyce* 70).

In general, the male characters from the corpus encounter enormous difficulties when confronting change: Jules is one of the exceptions. As anticipated, Jules appears to be confirming here his adherence to the myth of American exceptionalism, and the Myth of the Frontier and its bond to violence, which has in fact regenerated him. The report about the 1960s riots released by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in February, 1968 did not show such a positive interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

Obviously, Creighton goes on, Jules's answer to the question of how to be one's self is to trust the fires within, the paradoxical inner drives that make us members of the same human family, and choose, through their own complex chemistry, a unique fate for the self. In contrast, Maureen cannot be like her brother, and she will never overcome her devastating experiences (*Joyce* 70, 72). As Creighton adds in conclusion,

[p]aradoxically, freedom is found in Necessity. One is not simply free existentially to create oneself out of deliberate and conscious choices. Maureen's attempt to create a self according to a conscious plan, like Karen's, Clara's, and Nada's attempts before her, is an evasion rather than a realization of selfhood. Rather, one *must* act in accordance with one's conscious drives through which the self expresses and defines itself. [ ] Adherence to these inner dictums is not confining, but liberating. [ ] Jules is Oates's affirmative demonstration that *some* individuals,

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<sup>51</sup> The report of the commission (often known as the Kerner Commission after its chair, Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois) used statistical and historical evidence to demonstrate that the liberal vision of the United States as a prosperous, basically classless and tolerant society was an illusion: society remained, instead, chronically divided into opposing classes and races; but also argued that such division could still be reversed. The commission criticized, especially, the exceptionalism myth by means of which the United States rationalized their social violence, explicitly rejecting the notion of an American exceptionalism or national character (although at the same time, being mainly focused on American matters, the report appeared to suggest that there were "characteristically American" forms of violence). The scholars tried to refute the notion that modern violence was a form of survival of the violence of the nineteenth-century Frontier: they showed that characteristic forms of violence had always been present in "metropolitan" culture and they attributed the origins of social violence to the persistent spread of social, economic, and racial injustices, aspects that historiography in the exceptionalism tradition had mainly ignored (Slotkin 556, "1967 Detroit Riots" n. p.).

at least, are capable of full and joyful selfhood. (*Joyce* 72, emphasis in the original)

Karen runs away from home with her lover, Clara resorts to marriage to a wealthy man she does not love, and Nada incarnates the role of a suburban socialite hiding her real roots. In *Carthage*, Cressida also runs away and lives under a deceased person's identity for a while. These plans resulting in evasions are not totally successful.

### **5.5.5 Maureen's and Jules's Final Success**

In the end, Maureen apparently achieves her goals: Jim divorces his wife and marries her, they both move to a better neighborhood and she gets pregnant. It can be said that she has finally run away from home. As Oates comments, Maureen "hopes to be saved by disappearing into the middle class" ("Afterword" *them* 2006); but as Friedman notes, it is ironic that Maureen's salvation is a submission to the very life she had tried to escape becoming a housewife waiting for her husband (*Joyce* 89).

Although Maureen had initially tried to continue her studies, in the end her plan of escape takes the form of a marriage, which reminiscences of Clara's marriage to Revere in *Garden*. Both women are taking a limited advantage of the restrictive role that the patriarchal society has forced on them: being dependent upon a male figure. However, while Clara marries Revere at the end of the 1930s, Maureen conceives her plan at the end of the 1960s, when the sexual revolution was vigorously emerging. Taking into consideration the historical circumstances, Maureen's plan seems even more trite than Clara's. In any case, as Johnson highlights, Maureen finds her niche in order to exercise her own power: sexual power, in her case. Thus, she is both pathetic and admirable; a victim that survives (*Understanding* 81). As mentioned, these characters do not claim power on their own name, but by means of a male relative.

At first glance, then, it appears that Maureen has achieved her goals. But when Jules unexpectedly comes to see her, Maureen's insecurities are revealed: her married life is not so comfortable or stable as she would have liked (she and her husband are in debt); and, even



worse, she remains afraid of the uncertainties of the future. Her new life, based on pulp-fiction plots, appears at risk of crumbling.

Maureen, who has stopped interacting with her family and does not wish to see them again, is dismayed to see her brother there: “she felt really sickened, not by his face or his presence but by her own presence, so close to him, her own existence so closely tied to his” (*them* 476-477). The very fraternal bond that marveled Judd Mulvaney repels Maureen to the extent that she had even denied to her husband that Jules was her brother when they saw him on television. The reason for her reaction can be traced back to one of Maureen’s letters to Miss Oates, where she has written that her brother Jules is

the most important person in my life but what can you do with people who mean a lot to you? Love them? How do you love them, exactly what does that mean? Is it sitting and thinking about them, wanting to protect them? In that case to keep Jules safe he would have to be dead and buried. (*them* 313)

Obviously, Maureen has problems integrating and balancing her identity as a sister and daughter and as a (married) woman, partly because she feels that she has been abandoned and betrayed in some way or another by her mother, stepfather and brother. Since for her the proximity created by ties of love is fearsome (just as some other aspects of living), she chooses to have cold and studied relationships, like the one she has with her husband Jim: when Jules asks her if she loves her husband, she awkwardly avoids the question by answering that she is going to have a baby and that she is a different person now. Although she admits to Jules that she loves him and that she is grateful to him for all he has done for her (that is, she reaffirms their fraternal bond), she asserts that now she has a new life and thus prefers keeping her distance from her Family System of Origin to focus on her Self-Created Family System.

Jules also states his love for his sister, praising her for “getting out of [her suffering] using your head” (*them* 479); but he questions the viability of Maureen’s plan of cutting all ties with her family by asking “aren’t you one of *them*, yourself?” (*them* 479). As Creighton notes,

Jules refers both to their biological family, the Wendalls, and to the larger human family, which are two types of “them” (*Joyce* 70). More specifically, Jules seems to be referring to Maureen’s working social class. To this, Maureen remains silent. This interaction emphasizes one of the greatest differences between them: Jules embraces other human beings and accepts them as they are; while Maureen wishes to reduce her ties to them as much as possible due to her fear of being hurt again, and to forget the past. Jules himself mentions the possibility of violence reaching Maureen once more by telling her that her new neighborhood can burn down as well. Since Jules embraces unpredictability, the possibility of violence is very real for him, but he feels that this is not entirely negative. On the contrary, it may be an opportunity to confirm one’s own vitality and passion, to feel that one is alive. The irony of Jules warning, Grant asserts, is that he does not realize that Los Angeles, where he is heading, is as potentially destructive as Detroit (71).

Before going away, Jules reminds Maureen, first, of the difficulties of abandoning one’s class and past; second, that her security in her new neighborhood is only apparent, because it can burn down just as Detroit’s city center did during the revolts; and finally, that what happened to her can happen again, since men “can come back into your life [j] they can beat you up again and force your knees apart, why not? There’s so much of it in the world, so much semen, so many men!” (*them* 479). Jules is referring to one of Maureen’s greatest fears, that of violence and uncertainty, represented by the semen of her former clients. Jules is also alluding to the apparently random violence that permeates many of Oates’s works (particularly the novel *them*), which can unexpectedly hit Maureen once more. Jules’s visit reminds Maureen of her terrible past as a physically abused child and a Detroit resident during the revolts, which seems like a shadow closing upon her.

Maureen reflects the deep paranoia among white residents about the possibility of another riot. Indeed, Detroit was the only city in 1967 where disorder caused significant damage to residential districts, forcing 388 families to be displaced; and the aftermath of the riots witnessed a trend of high-crime rates (especially homicide) and arson

fires that continued for decades. Consequently, Detroit acquired the image of a volatile urban war zone, an image that the city is still trying to cast aside (McGraw n. p.). Maureen is terrified about being engulfed by this violence, the same that her brother has embraced as having positive consequences.

Following the visit to Maureen, Jules heads for Los Angeles with Mort Piercy, not because he supports Mort's ideals but because he takes the opportunity to finally travel to the West. Jules, thus, has assumed a new romantic role: the fortune seeker, under the pretext of being a counterculture activist. Jules also plans to find Nadine again and marry her: he again devotes himself to his romantic love plot, which has previously deluded, disappointed and almost destroyed him, but which has also given him courage and hope to keep on pursuing his dreams. As Creighton summarizes it, Jules might be opening himself to another gunshot wound, but also to the emotional fulfilment he craves for (*Joyce* 70). Jules's insistent perusal of his love object sharply contrasts with Maureen's calculated marriage, as Allen notices: Jules is the only one who has a romantic conception of love, and he dramatically lives out his affair with Nadine. Maureen does not even understand the fantasies of romantic love: in her letters to Miss Oates, she wonders how one falls in love (79). We should notice, though, that Jules's conception of love is rather deluded.

In Daly's words, the novel satirizes the hierarchic moral code of the romance plot that assumes that the rich should be able to define themselves at the expense of the poor, or that man should be able to define himself at the expense of a woman: although Jules feels a certain sense of expansion when enacting this plot, the same script does not offer Nadine and Maureen the same possibilities. Even after his many defeats, Jules still clings to his romantic dreams and hopes to marry Nadine. He is still motivated by the quest form often found in naturalistic novels, but his idea of himself is at least ambiguous. He remains the questor, then, and imagines himself the author of his own story as he sets off to California; but for Maureen, he has become one of "them" (Daly 43, 44). That is, Jules belongs to the class that Maureen has fought so hard to leave behind, and thus she does not wish to have any more contact with him.

Maureen's and Jules's final success, Creighton points out, is then laced with irony: Jules is a pimp, a thief and a murderer before opportunistically adhering to an antipoverty program to finance his trip to California; and Maureen's past prostitution and her calculating husband-snatching distance her from the "typical" American housewife (*Joyce* 64). But as Oates argues, the important fact about the characters in *them* is that they all survive in the end ("Transformation" 55). She has argued the same about *Wonderland*. Thus, Jules (and Maureen to a lesser extent) belong to the group of Oatesian characters, who, in her own words,

yearn for a higher life—those in whom the life-form itself is stirring. By singling out individuals who are representative of our society and who, as people, interest me very much, I attempt to submerge myself in that foreign personality and see *how* and *why* and *to what end* the behavior that people call "anti-social" or "neurotic" is actually functioning. And it is always my discovery that these people are genuinely superior to the role in life, the social station, the economic level, the marriage, the job, the philosophical beliefs, etc., in which they find themselves. They must have liberation, room to grow in. If they don't get it, they become violent or self-destructive or apathetic, and sink back to an earlier level of existence. They are not sick, but normal—it is normal to grow, and to continue to grow, and a society that does not allow for this fact of life will always be plagued by neuroses. On the other hand, the apparently well-adapted human being, who is content with whatever he has in life, with his job, his marriage, his prospects, is a person who has come to the end of his personal development, and will not have to struggle any longer (unless something happens to upset him). So, it is the restless who interest me, as a novelist, for only out of restlessness can higher personalities emerge, just as, in a social context, it is only out of occasional surprises and upheavals that new ways of life can emerge. (qtd. in Boesky 51-52, emphasis in the original)

Jules is the epitome of these superior characters in our corpus: he is constantly restless, and although his quest for meaning and fulfilment is never culminated, he joyfully dedicates all his energy to the task. After being shot, Jules sank back into a previous level of existence, as Oates says. The Detroit riots give him the opportunity of becoming liberated by invigorating him and allowing him to become released through violence. This violent climax makes Jules return to his former lost self and gives him the courage to continue to chase his mythological (and possibly deluded) dreams in the West.

In *Garden*, Swan experiences a similar situation to that of Jules: when trying to grow up and find his own path in life, he is constricted by the forces governing his origin, that is, his triple origin as a son of Clara, Lowry and Revere. Being unable to come to terms with the puzzle of his identity and achieve a satisfactory future (in other words: to grow) or to attain the degree of control he yearned for, Swan's rage builds up until it is directed against his parents and himself, and he commits a murder-suicide. In *Expensive*, Richard has also tried to find transcendence by writing a memoir to come to terms with his childhood, specifically, with the memory of his mother. However, Richard dissatisfaction is so deep that he plans to kill himself.

In the case of Swan and Richard, violence does not entail liberation but utter destruction; unless we consider that, in Swan's case, death frees him from his pain, or that it is somehow an ultimate act of control. In the case of Richard, the death of his mother does not facilitate his reconciliation to her memory at all; and this reconciliation would neither be achieved by his committing suicide, as he plans.

Indeed, Oates has commented that the *Wonderland Quartet* deals with men who try to liberate their consciousness, but

only in the last novel, *them*, does this consciousness really become liberated in what I see to be an ironic way, that an act, a gratuitous act of murder, is committed, and frees the individual. He's on his way to some sort of American success whereas in the other two novels it didn't work. In *them*, I saw Jules as a kind of American success in an ironic sense, of course. He is a hero and a murderer at once.

I think that is ironic. (Oates "Interview. a" *Conversations with Joyce* 9)

Maureen, on her part, lacks Jules's bravery. She belongs to the first group of Oatesian female characters who are rather passive and dependent. Nevertheless, Maureen is quite resourceful in her passivity, and like Jules, she endures all kind of complications and aggressions that come into her way, until she eventually finds some sense of security, even if it is not totally inviolable.

In conclusion, the siblings' relationships in the corpus are much healthier and more supportive than the bonds of the mother-child and father-child subsystem. They also show a more equal balance of power than the aforementioned subsystems. The fact that the siblings behave as companions and support each other in moments of crisis reinforces this idea. This is the reason why Oates's has presented Maureen's and Jules's development as a parallel process, in which despite ascribing to different life choices mostly conditioned by their gender, they keep on being brother and sister.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine the relationships of the traditional nuclear family in a corpus of seven novels written by Joyce Carol Oates: *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), *Wonderland* (1971), *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996), *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) and *Carthage* (2014). The traditional nuclear family, constructed within the patriarchal society, is a type of family constituted by a married heterosexual couple with legitimate children, in which each member of the family has a strictly defined role and is subjected to a series of expectations and obligations. Among the most prominent ones, we find the gendered division of work that places women in the private sphere of the house and men in the public sphere of the labor market, the consideration that the father is the head of the household, the defense of the privacy of the family, and the affirmation that these families are not only the most convenient form of social arrangement, but also the safest one. The nuclear family is composed by three basic subsystems: the mother-father, the parent-children and the siblings' subsystem. Our aim in this study was analyzing how the characters from these subsystems related to each other and evolved within the context of the family. In particular, we have focused on the relationships between parents and children (that is, mother-child and father-child), due to their centrality in the development of the characters, but we have also examined the relationships between the married couple and the children to exemplify the relevance of these relationships in the configuration of the family and its members, since all these subsystems are interrelated. The study of these subsystems has allowed us to prove that the rigidity of roles that the traditional nuclear family exhibits has a detrimental effect on the characters which is usually though not exclusively manifested through role distortion and violence.

In the chapter "Parents," we have analyzed how relationships in families are not dyadic, since all the subsystems interfere with one another. In this case, the quality of the parents' relationship within the

mother-father subsystem has a definitive effect on the children. The discussion of Helene and Jesse's transition from an unmarried couple into marriage and parenthood in *Wonderland* has been a perfect example for demonstrating the pivotal relevance of property in the traditional nuclear family, since Jesse is not only the main breadwinner, but he is also extremely dominating toward his family.

This couple is founded upon the illusion that they fulfil the roles of father/husband and mother/wife perfectly. As a result, Helene and Jesse are unable to truly perceive each other because they imprison their partner into the expectations and obligations of her/his role: namely, for Jesse, Helene is simply (as their friend Monk suggests) the bearer of his children, from whom she expects sensitivity and docility; and for Helene, Jesse is simply her husband, a necessary figure in her life that helps her fulfil her assumed female destiny as a mother/wife. The negative complementarity of their roles provokes a feeling of estrangement between them which results in an extremely poor communication due to their impossibility of accessing each other's true identity. They constitute a perfect example of a rigid subsystem, since their marriage is sustained upon the acquisition of these restrictive roles.

As a couple, the Vogels, thus, become an empty abstraction, and prove that the nuclear family can function as an apt social arrangement, but at the expense of the true identity of its members: each member performs her/his role obligations and expectations, but does not find any satisfaction in their good performance. The only one who rebels against Jesse's control is Shelley, who in her search for freedom, constructs her own communal family within the counterculture. But this alternative family proves to be a kind of parody of nuclear families where Shelley adopts the constraining position of the "Angel of the House," assuming as well some characteristics of the Cult of True Womanhood, particularly, female submissiveness, in her case to violence and abuse.

This chapter also deals with the complicated link that Jesse holds to his body, which becomes for him a scientific object that he tries to put under the strict control of his mind. For this reason, he attempts to ignore the natural, instinctual processes of the body, a proclivity that is manifested by his dislike of blood. The fact that blood is commonly



related to women also hints at Jesse's misogyny. Jesse's attitude partly derives from his messianic aspirations and his determination to impose his will upon everyone, particularly, his family. Jesse stands then as the most remarkable example in the corpus of the isolated ego, which is monologically deaf to the voices of people around him and which Oates, who defends the relevance of the communality of human experience, often criticizes. Moreover, Jesse's dominant ego finds manifestation in his strong misogyny, a feeling which he seems to have inherited from his father figures and which has traditionally served to justify inequalities such as the division of labor within the context of the patriarchal nuclear family.

Francesca Cancian's classification of the different types of marriage has been useful to analyze the evolution of this institution in the twentieth century. The traditional companionship marriage as exemplified by Clara and Revere from *Garden* in the 1940s is characterized by a strict adherence to the Doctrine of the Two Spheres and the clear differentiation of gender roles; the independence marriage, analyzed in the characters of Nada and Elwood from *Expensive* during the late 1950s, shows a special concern with the personal freedom of its members; and the interdependence marriage is characterized by flexible gender roles, but maintains a commitment based on mutual dependence, as seen in Arlette and Zeno from *Carthage* in the last decades of the twentieth century. The evolution of the types of marriage suggests a pattern of progressive democratization of family relationships through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Parenting Styles (namely, authoritarian, democratic, indifferent or uninvolved, and permissive or indulgent) have been analyzed in this chapter by resorting to the ideas of Maccoby and Martin, Baumrind and Palacios González. In the corpus there is also a mixed parenting style, represented by Nada and Elwood. This analysis has evinced a process of democratization of the family manifested in Oates's fiction, by means of the gradual decrease of the authoritarian attitude of parents to their children.

In *Wonderland*, the authoritarian style exerted by Dr. Pedersen serves to impose the four main pillars of the patriarchal family: privacy, gender inequality, property and (only apparent) protection. In reality,

these pillars imply the concealment of psychological violence, the enactment of rigid gender roles, and the extreme dominance of the father/husband, symbolized by his voracity.

*Mulvaney's* has been used to illustrate that parenting styles may change in time: Corinne and Michael's seemingly democratic parenting style becomes authoritarian after the family tragedy. This proves that the initial democratic pattern they exhibited was mostly illusory, a fantasy analogous to the family's misleading belief in their own perfection. After Marianne is raped, the rigidity of the family structure is revealed and it frustrates the possibility of adapting to the new circumstances, especially in the case of the father, who is unable to assume the loss of the image of Marianne as the perfect daughter. When Michael decides to send Marianne away from the family, Corinne supports him. This decision, which initially appears to be a token of Corinne's devotion for her husband, and of her stated wish to keep the family united, actually reveals that the husband-wife subsystem is based on the wife's submission to her husband, a trait found in most patriarchal families. Therefore, the presentation of the nuclear family as the most beneficial social arrangement may be deceitful. In this case, the family is only recomposed (significantly, under the mother's promotion) after the rigid schemes of its former conception are destroyed along with the authority of the Father, which in this case was the most harmful element.

The lack of emotional involvement of indifferent parents commonly makes children feel vulnerable. In *them*, this is manifested in Loretta's lack of communication with her children, which is particularly perceived in the strained relationship that she has with Maureen. Besides, the analysis of Loretta's mostly indifferent style has demonstrated how parents transform their attitudes according to the behavior of their children. In this case, Loretta makes more maturity demands on the responsible and reliable Maureen, and often allows her most irresponsible children (Betty and Randolph) to do what they please.

In Arlette and Zeno from *Carthage*, who are permissive/indulgent parents, low maturity demands and reluctance to exert authority have opposite results: Cressida becomes rather spoiled (although the

possibility that she is in the autistic spectrum should also be taken into account), and Juliet becomes mature and responsible.

In the chapter on “Mothers,” motherhood as institution is shown as the result of the patriarchal attempt to control the reproductive capacity of women. This implies the transformation of an initially natural/corporal experience into a social role which requires the mother’s absolute dedication to her child, and which is further presented as the only available option for women: the role of mother/wife as seen Clara from *Garden* and Helene from *Wonderland*. This control over women starts in pregnancy, during which women are subdued to a set of expectations which may give origin to what Rich calls “natural mothers”: women whose identity is restricted to their being mothers, and who are expected to exert what Sharon Hays labels as “intensive mothering,” a parenting model that encourages the mother to dedicate all her resources and time to raise her children. This traditional definition of the role of the mother implies the annulment both of motherhood as experience as well as of women’s own identity, making thus impossible the balance between experience and institution, as well as mother and woman. Thus, women within the nuclear family have been devoid of their personalities and their autonomy and transformed into empty and silenced roles, into simple mechanisms for reproduction.

One of the manifestations of the patriarchal attempts to control the experience of motherhood by maintaining it within the limits of the social order is the imposition of the obligation of legitimizing this experience by means of marriage, as seen in *Garden*. Legitimization then is aimed at controlling not only women’s reproductive capacity by confining it to the married heterosexual couple typical of traditional nuclear families, but it is also aimed at ensuring that the legitimate father controls the women’s progeny, being thus reinforced as the head of the household.

Patriarchy also works at guaranteeing that its rules and structures are transmitted by parents into new generations of children either consciously or unconsciously. In *Wonderland*, Mrs. Pedersen and Helene exhibit a total subjugation to their husbands as well as an institutional approach to motherhood, which has serious effects on their daughters Hilda and Shelley. This shows the pervading influence of

vertical identity (as described by Carl Solomon) over the horizontal identity in the construction of the self within the mother-daughter subsystem. More specifically, the daughters inherit from their mothers an extremely weak sense of self, partly because they have not received self-assuredness from them. On the one hand, the psychologically abused Mrs. Pedersen compensates her lack of self-love by the excess of love she gives to her family, symbolized by food: the distorted quality of this kind of motherly love based on the mother's lack of self-love and self-respect finds ironical manifestation in her daughter Hilda's retreat into her own womb in search for comfort and as the only possible shelter to escape from the excessive control of her father. On the other hand, Helene's lack of identity and self-love is manifested in her rejection of her body, and in an extremely cold enactment of motherhood after contemplating performing an abortion upon herself. This is reflected on Shelley, who is so emaciated that her reproductive capacity becomes damaged, and who, like her mother, eventually submits to the will of her partner. Helene and Shelley are unable to reconcile their identities as mother and daughter, respectively, and as autonomous women, and let other people or institutions define them. The problems of the mother-daughter subsystem lead these two daughters to assert that they have been born from their fathers. Luce Irigaray described this devaluation of maternal power as "the murder of the mother," and Karen Horney referred to it as "womb envy." We might conclude that some mothers in traditional families help to perpetuate patriarchal conceptions that contribute to their devaluation and that enormously damage the relationship with their daughters, thus entering a self-damaging cycle.

The required submission of women to their role as mothers has imposed severe restrictions on women's participation in the labor market. Historically, women were allowed to work outside the house on condition that their jobs were not aimed at personal fulfilment or did not interfere with their role as mothers. As a result, they were only allowed to work in order to provide for their families, and in jobs mostly associated with taking care of others. In the corpus, Nada from *Expensive* and Zoe from *Bird*, who are mothers and have significant artistic skills (they are a writer and a singer, respectively), challenge

this rule of women working exclusively to provide for their families and developing jobs that are related with their supposed maternal nurturance.

Although Zoe recognizes the tension between her artistic career and her motherly role, she tries to integrate both experiences. In contrast, Nada subordinates both her artistic skills and her motherly experience to the construction of her social role as a socialite. This leads her, first, to conceal her writing in what seems to be an interiorization of the patriarchal scorn for women's creativity; and second, to refuse to be exclusively reduced to the role of a mother, as her son Richard demands. These two cases illustrate how patriarchy has presented women's creativity (represented by Zoe's and Nada's artistic careers) and procreativity as conflictive options for women.

Mother-daughter relationships in the corpus rarely exhibit balanced and reciprocal bonds of confidence and affection because of the interference of patriarchal practices. Corinne from *Mulvaney's* (before Marianne is raped) and Arlette from *Carthage* show balanced bonds to their daughters, since they have a generally warm rapport to them, which may be a direct consequence of their positive link to motherhood: unlike in the case of Mrs. Pedersen or even Helene, being mothers does not eradicate their sense of self. Their self-love is healthily reflected in their love for their daughters. But most of the mother-daughter relationships in the corpus are dominated by mistrust, hurt, resentment and feelings of abandonment. These daughters are said to feel, in Rich's terms, unmothered, which may lead either to a constant search for the mother or to the assumption of a motherly role towards others.

Therefore, the body of the mother, along with her sexual identity and her sexual autonomy, have often been culturally scorned, devaluated or censored. This does not only affect the mother, but also the daughter, who cannot find a positive and confident model that helps her accept her own body. The result is a distortion within this subsystem.

Finally, in *them*, Loretta causes role confusion by forcing her daughter to enact not only the role of the obedient daughter, but also the role of the mother/wife for the rest of the family, in substitution of Loretta herself. Once more, a rigid ascription to family roles distorts the

mother-daughter relationship: Loretta does not wish to assume some of the expectations of her role as mother, and particularly, as a wife to her new husband, but she thinks that these functions must necessarily be fulfilled, and she selects Maureen to perform them, placing her into a position of danger with the aggressive Furlong.

Eventually, Maureen's stepfather physically assaults her twice, and although Loretta is nurturing and affectionate after the most severe beating, she does not interfere in the first minor assault. By basically telling Maureen that she was to blame for provoking Furlong's anger, Loretta is perpetuating patriarchal notions that label men as aggressors and women as victims. Besides, Loretta also infuses in Maureen the idea that women are either mothers or prostitutes, which conditions Maureen's narrow vision of her future choices and probably influences her decision to be first a prostitute and then a mother as a way to construct her future and escape from her environment.

Finally, in *Bird*, Lucille has a well-intentioned overprotective attitude toward Krista, who feels suffocated about it; however, she is also able to recognize her mother's complicated situation as the recently divorced wife of a murder suspect in a highly conservative town.

Mother-son relationships are characterized by one of the pillars of the patriarchal nuclear family, property, reflected into a particular version of the Oedipal bond in *Garden* and *Expensive* from which the father figure is practically erased due to its lack of entity and power.

In *Expensive*, Richard cannot conceive for his mother an identity apart from institutional motherhood. As a result, he shows a great resentment for her literary career, which ironically finds manifestation in the confusion between fiction and reality that governs his life, a confusion which also affects Nada herself, who creates a phony identity as a Russian émigré. This resentment leads Richard to exert a role reversal on a procreative level manifested in his attempt to control his parents; and a creative role reversal by trying to become an author and turning his mother into a character. Richard's final conviction that he has killed his mother functions as an ultimate manifestation of the confusion between fiction and reality, artistic creativity and procreation which governs his life and his relationship with his mother.

Clara from *Garden* does not claim power in her own name but in the name of her husband and son. Particularly, Clara tries to compensate for her deprivations by encouraging Swan to go to college and to inherit Revere's wealth, but the boy, torn by his unsolved triple identity as the son of Clara, Lowry and Rereve and the divergent pulls for the future they represent, eventually turns his rage on Clara and tries to shoot her.

According to Ellyn Kaschak's version of Freud's Oedipus complex, Richard and Swan never solve the complex: they adopt a sexist attitude and tend to seek power in destructive manners. Afterward, they turn that violence into themselves by committing suicide in the case of Swan and planning to do so in the case of Richard. These sons make a desperate final attempt to take control of their destinies by paradoxically, ending their lives. This pull to destruction is yet another sign of the frustrations derived from trying to conform to rigid roles: Richard is frustrated about Nada's refusal to be an institutional mother, and Swan does not find any fulfilment in being the heir of her stepfather's fortune, as his family expects him to do.

In contrast with Richard's and Swan's attitude toward their mothers, Aaron Kruller has a far more positive approach to his mother's career in *Bird*, even if at times he has conflictive feelings over Zoe's abandonment of his father. Unlike Richard and Swan, he never considers hurting his mother due to his resentment.

In conclusion, mothers have been imprisoned in a position of subordination within their families, and expected to assume at all times a nurturing role. This nurturing function was expected to be maintained even if they decided to work outside the house, an activity which was only found legitimate if it was aimed at economically supporting the family. As a result, the control over the mother/(house)wife has been so extreme that it has affected not only her reproductive capacity, but also her creative skills.

Similarly to the chapter on mothers, in the chapter on "Fathers," we have established a distinction between biological fatherhood (the process by which a man begets a child) and social fatherhood (the cultural coding of men as fathers, related to the institutions and configured by laws) by following Barbara Hobson and David Morgan. The comparison of these two types of fatherhood to the two types of

motherhood discussed by Rich has proved that fatherhood as institution is a structure of empowerment for men, whereas the institution of motherhood results in the subordination of women. These are two pivotal points upon which the traditional nuclear family is constructed.

As a result, the fathers/husbands from the corpus, being (or feeling) the heads of their families, are obsessed with maintaining control over them. Thus, they want to be the sole breadwinners and the legitimate social fathers of the children, to hold the economic power and to control and protect the members of their families according to their rules and morality. But the rigidity of their conception prevents them from adapting to changes, not only external social changes (like the Great Depression) but also internal changes inside their own families (like a divorce), and this leads to disaster, often in the form of physical or psychological violence.

One of the most relevant achieved roles often ascribed to the father/husband is the good-provider role as described by Jesse Bernard, which has further served to justify the authority of the father over the family. This role has undergone historical changes as manifested in the corpus. For instance, in *Garden*, we have seen how the impossibility to fulfil this role during the Great Depression brought a sense of shame, desperation and uselessness to many men. Once more, the great role expectations of the patriarchal family bring pressure into its members. For Carleton, this is translated into a deep nostalgia for the old times, a period that he associates with the possibility of maintaining his role as the indisputable head of the family.

Next, we have analyzed the father-children subsystem in the context of the nuclear traditional family, which places fathers as the norm and the only monologic authority. Due to this, some of these men felt entitled to exert violence in order to (according to their perspective) keep their position. This violence was usually seen as a private matter, so that institutions or the community were often uninformed about its occurrence and could not then intervene to prevent it.

We have also reflected on the limited effects of fatherhood on men's lives and bodies when compared to women's and on how the fathers' contribution to childcare is traditionally reduced over the course of the first year (as seen with Revere), leaving mothers with



greater responsibility, and creating the sensation that they are “naturally” better suited than men for these tasks. This distance between men and babies reinforced the Doctrine of the Two Spheres and deprived men from possibly obtaining gratification from close contact to their children.

The father-daughter subsystem in the corpus was shown to be characterized by the impossibility or refusal of the fathers to adapt to the changes of their adolescent daughters (especially regarding their sexuality) or of the family structure, because they interpret this as an attack to their own identity and their role as the heads of the patriarchal family, often reacting by exerting violence upon their daughters, or by indirectly damaging them. Thus, we have examined physical child abuse in the case of the relationships between Carleton and Clara, and Furlong and Maureen; the fantasy of incorporation and subsequent banishment of Marianne in the case of Michael Mulvaney; and stalking in the case of the relationship between Jesse and Shelley. *Bird* presents a slightly different situation, because Edward’s abduction of Krista responds to his wish to recover a more central position in his family that he has recently lost due to his divorce and the order of restraint he has received. Moreover, in most of these novels, the excessively close bond of the daughters to the father (which is sometimes nearly romantic or erotic, as in *Bird*) causes difficulties for the girl to attain independence.

While examining physical child abuse, we have concluded that the social attention it receives has increased in time. In *Garden* and *them*, the perpetrators Carleton and Furlong were found to have low self-esteem, possibly derived from their uneven performance as breadwinners. For Carleton, violence becomes his only means of acquiring some sense of control that he has lost in the chaos of the Great Depression. Thus, he dreams of the supposed stability of the past while he tries to maintain his role as the ruler of the family, thinking that he is the central element that holds the family unit together. As a consequence, he assaults Clara, who in his view, has defied this control. His search for her after she runs away is as fruitless as his search for the past. The fact that he only achieves peace in death demonstrates that the type of family he dreams of, in which the father occupies the position of power, is being inevitably transformed.

In *them*, Maureen also rebels against Furlong's role as a breadwinner by making her own money. She does this unintentionally while trying to earn money to flee from her neighborhood, but Furlong interprets it as a questioning of his capacity to provide for the family, which is a symbol of self-esteem and virility for him. He might also be moved by some kind of sexual jealousy caused by the role confusion that exists in the stepfather-stepdaughter subsystem. In any case, by beating Maureen, he is destroying the protective function of nuclear families, which is nonetheless recovered when the rest of the family helps Maureen through her comatose state. One of the most nurturing figures for Maureen at this point is her uncle Brock, the most positive father-figure from the novel who ironically is not a father. Most crucially, the family survives the loss of all its fathers (the biological father Howard, the stepfather Furlong and the surrogate father Brock).

Loss is one of the central themes in *Mulvaneys*, where it is mostly experienced by Marianne and Michael. Specifically, after being raped, Marianne loses her self-esteem, her sense of identity, her family, her house, her friends and her sense of belonging; whereas Michael loses his image of his perfect daughter Marianne, as well as his business, the farm and his family. Michael is the one who prompts the main tragedy in the book by, in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's terms, incorporating the loss thus refusing to recognize its full dimension. He considers rape a crime against his property, Marianne. This vision of rape as an attack against male property is yet another of the manners in which patriarchy has appropriated women's bodies. Due to Michael's inability to confront the situation, Marianne is expelled by the father with the approval of her mother, Corinne, who deems that this is the only way to keep the family united: by submitting to the demands of the head of the family and giving priority to the preservation of the origins of the traditional nuclear family, the heterosexual married couple.

In *Bird*, Edward Diehl's abduction of his daughter Krista is an attempt to regain, by force, the role as a custodial father/husband he has lost after his divorce. The novel also presents the bond of possession that characterizes this father-daughter subsystem. Krista is indeed the incarnation of the good daughter, who is willing to passively obey any of her father's demands. Her attachment to her father has an almost-

romantic nature which is never fulfilled due to its incestuous implications, but which finds a surrogate figure in her schoolmate Aaron Kruller. Besides, we have also discussed Ellyn Kaschak's theories on female sexual development, the so-called Antigone phase, which Krista has difficulties in solving due to her ambiguous and dependent bond to her father.

Jesse's perusal of Shelley in *Wonderland* is originated in his erotization of his daughter since she is a toddler, which may be related to his lack of involvement in her upbringing. Jesse is paranoid about protecting Shelley and preventing her from having sex. Shelley, anguished by this dominance and her impossibility to integrate her role as Jesse's child with her own identity, runs away and forms a communal family, which is revealed as equally oppressive because it reproduces the gender inequalities and abuse common to many nuclear families. By means of these episodes, Oates makes a critique on the hidden sexism of the counterculture of the 1960s. Therefore, Shelley runs away in order to find liberation but becomes dominated again: her lover prostitutes her and convinces her that she has no identity, adhering to a nihilism that perhaps suggests the youth's exhaustion with the contemporary world. At the end of the novel, Noel and Jesse fight over who owns Shelley: Jesse claims her as his daughter, while Noel proclaims that she is their mother/wife. This suggests that the rigid property and gender roles are shared by both her nuclear Family System of Origin and her communal Self-Created Family System.

In short, in order to maintain their traditional position as heads of the family, these fathers eventually break one of the basic rules of that role: they fail to protect their daughters, although they are convinced that they are actually protecting them and acting moved by their affection for their daughters. Besides, their behavior is partly the result of their lack of imagination and flexibility when perceiving their daughters, which prevents them from facing their transformations in constructive manners.

In the father-son subsystem, Elwood has been scrutinized as one of the few fathers that fulfils the breadwinner role in a flawless manner. However, he still feels dissatisfied by his demanding life style, which points at some of the costs of the role. We may infer that even those

who comply to the demands of the traditional family roles are disappointed about their inflexibility.

Elwood's son Richard, however, wishes for a more traditional family with a clear division of roles, and even if his father fulfils the role of breadwinner, Richard would like him to be more authoritarian. But Nada prevents this, since by refusing to be a submissive mother/wife, she is depriving Elwood of his authority from Richard's perspective. Therefore, since his father cannot be the head of the household, Richard thinks that he is nothing. The final irony of the novel is that, when Elwood eventually becomes an authoritarian father, he also renounces to be nurturing, so that father and son become distant. Elwood goes back once more to be the breadwinner by maintaining his son, demonstrating that the adherence to a single role may have nefarious consequences.

In *them*, Howard exerts his authority by means of violence because he is not able to exert it by means of his role as a provider for the family. His son Jules resents his cold and silent character, as well as his violence, and he fears his authority as the Father. Jules avoids being engulfed by his father's coolness and emotionlessness inheritance: unlike in classical naturalistic novels, Jules triumphs over deterministic forces.

In *Mulvaney's*, an adult Judd is able to understand how his father, who used to be the indisputable head of the household, feels betrayed when his sons start to gradually abandon the house and to oppose him, because he considers this a challenge to his authority as a father. Judd, however, does not excuse his violence against his family. In sum, the new generation of sons from the corpus appears to be less aggressive than their fathers were, and to avoid following their violent inclinations.

The last chapter, "Children," was founded upon the premise that personal awareness and identity usually emerges in the family, and examined how this occurred in the families from the corpus during the period of adolescence. We also provided a historical account of the life-stages in America by resorting to the work of Eugenia Scabini, which allowed us to place adolescence as relatively recent identified differentiated stage between childhood and adolescence.

Adolescence was subsequently approached as a developmental process, including biological, cognitive and socioemotional processes, which affect areas such as the body, intelligence, and relationships both to other people and to contexts, respectively. Next, we have addressed this stage as a liminal state featured by opposing pulls to childhood and to adulthood; and have contemplated the relationships of teenagers with their families, and the difficulties of communicating with parents once that the daughters and sons start questioning and challenging several subjects. Additionally, the common Oatesian phenomenon of running away from home during adolescence was proved to be a way of negotiating and conciliating the identities as daughters and sons with their need for independence. This was proved to be closely related to gender: while boys and young men are confident of acquiring a position of power which allows them to make decisions upon their future, girls and young women find themselves in a much more unstable position which does not guarantee at all their capacity to make choices. This may be the reason why they run away more often than boys. Through their flights, though, women frequently encounter violence, but most of the works end with a promise of reconciliation with home, or at least, a better understanding of the women's personal circumstances.

We have also analyzed how Oates introduces the question of women's access to power by questioning indirect methods to achieve it, or methods that emulate male violence. This is the reason why in Oates career, women are increasingly able to claim a power of their own.

Subsequently, identity Formation has been discussed in the light of Jack Martin, Jeff H. Sugarman and Sarah Hickenbottom's concepts of self (the changing, and dynamic process of self-understanding of particular being) and agency (the deliberate and reflective activity of a person in the world). We have then contrasted their assertion of the importance of the Other in individual development against the context of the family, which was revealed as a central influence for the subject, either as a model to imitate or to reject. Next, we have analyzed the rhythm of withdrawal and return that gives origin to the basic motives of love and fear, comfort and discomfort and absence and presence of the Other. This has served as the background for the study of Cressida's

relationship to her familial referents in *Carthage*, who dictate the construction of her identity by defining her as the smart sister in opposition to her pretty sister Juliet. Out of envy and her internalization of the role of the bad sister, Cressida psychologically abuses Juliet. Some of the attacks are aimed at proving Juliet's incompetence and reinforcing Cressida's position as the intelligent one, making Juliet unsure of her capacities while at the same time dependent on Cressida, a fact that would give a renewed value to her. This is one of the rare cases of the corpus where this type of violence is not followed by other forms, maybe because Cressida does not really hate her sister.

We have discovered, then, that Cressida is an agent of her actions because she has assimilated her reputation as a smart girl as a product of her own reflection even if it comes from the external perceptions of others; and she has also actively contributed to construct her identity on the basis of such external traits, while at the same time hiding some other personal characteristics that do not completely suit that image (such as her low self-esteem). This proves the pervasive influence of the family in the construction of self-awareness.

Upon entering other contexts such as college, Cressida needs to reassess her identity. During her disappearance from home, she has an experience of self-loss and adopts a fake identity, a fantasy that comes as a substitution of a real identity. In Abraham and Torok's terms, she is failing to introject her losses due to her refusal to directly address them. Only when she recognizes the true meaning of her actions is, she is able to come back home as a new person. Her recovery is thus only partial.

The reaction of her family to Cressida's disappearance is varied: while her father Zeno clings to the past and is convinced she will safely return (thus never recognizing the reality of the loss), her mother Arlette successfully mourns her and looks into the future, becoming another example of a female character who is able to adapt to the shifting circumstances better than men. However, Juliet is an exception for this trend, because she is unable to verbalize the trauma and besides, for her, Cressida's loss is completely subordinated to the loss of Brett: she becomes a prisoner of her faded dream of her life with him. Finally,

Brett appears to find some redemption in jail for the sins he considers he has committed at war.

Afterward, Jesse and his familial referents were scrutinized. His development is shaped by his devotion to a series of father figures that abandon him in some manner. The novel raises questions about how an identity is formed by presenting a protagonist who, although having his own personality, is composed by a tangle of traits he has absorbed from others, from which he develops an extremely dominant ego that promotes his disregard for the Other, especially women, an attitude that makes him feel isolated.

Jesse's father figures are, first, his biological father Willard, who, besides being unable to communicate with his family, has an absolute sense of property over them: his frustration over his miserable life leads him to eradicate his own role as a father and his whole family. Jesse spends most of the novel trying to overcome the trauma of these murders. His process of verbalization has been understood as a "language re-acquisition" process similar to children learning to speak, illustrated by Steven Pinker and David Crystal. We have found that Jesse needs to find his own language, one that can express not only the trauma but also his emotions, a language that is not what Mikhail Bakhtin would label as a monologic imposition to others but a constructive dialogue. Communication was thus found to be a fundamental need in families: its absence causes hurt, misunderstandings, loneliness and alienation.

With the second father figure, Grandpa Vogel, Jesse constitutes a family group that is not a traditional nuclear family composed of husband, wife and children; but a family of two members in which the grandfather exerts a parenting function. Next, Jesse's stepfather Dr. Pedersen introduces him to homeostasis at a theoretical level, while in practice, he exhibits a blatant unbalance. This incapacity to find balance is reflected in the rigidity and control that he exerts over the family. For him, the four basic criteria of traditional nuclear families are sacred laws: privacy, property, protection and gender discrimination, which hide violence, dissatisfaction, resentment and emotional turmoil to his wife and children. Dr. Pedersen's fake homeostasis has been then proved to be completely violent.

Along with the next figure, Dr. Perrault, we have introduced an intricate discussion about the brain, the body and the senses. This character follows behavioristic theories to adhere to the preponderance of the brain over the body and the senses, defending the transplantation of brains, which would enable men to reproduce without the intervention of women. This represents a patriarchal diminishment of women's procreative power not only from a scientific and artistic point of view, but also from a purely biological one in favor of granting men the position of creators of life in the place of women. The discussion of this character also introduces another crucial theme in the novel, memory, which is presented as one of the central parts of a person's identity.

Jesse undergoes then a process of split personality by which he becomes Dr. Vogel/Jesse. Dr. Vogel has been examined by means of Carl Jung's concept of the shadow, the unconscious side of a person that represents her/his forbidden and uncontrolled desires. Dr. Vogel has been described as a potential murderer and sexual predator, but he might also represent the authority of the Father in all its power, the side of the character that wishes to impose his will on his family (whom he considers his absolute property) at all costs; whereas Jesse seems more inclined to a slightly more democratic conception of the family. The ending of both editions has also been examined in order to highlight that the revised edition gives voice to the daughter, who dies in the first one. In both versions, Jesse tentatively starts to acknowledge his true identity and his behavior until that moment, realizing (to diverse extents) his inclination to become a violent Father like his predecessors.

The following section introduced the theme of siblings by resorting to John W. Santrock and explaining how they negotiate issues of competition, defeat, accommodation, cooperation and protection. We have discovered that in the traditional family unit, the sibling subsystem is perhaps the most egalitarian subsystem; in contrast to the parental subsystem, where the man holds the power, or the parent-children subsystem, where the parent usually occupies the position of authority. Siblings have been then examined as allies and enemies, as well as agents of socialization.



Subsequently, the socioemotional processes in the sibling's relationship between Maureen and Jules has been examined by following their parallel lives, especially, their relationship to violence (whereas Jules is fascinated with violence, with Detroit, and with fire, which he sees as purge and a rebirth; Maureen is afraid of violence), their yearn for money as the key to success and to abandoning their social class, and the construction of their lives upon literature and popular fiction. In contrast to Maureen, who only sees a set of limited options in her future (namely, being a prostitute or a mother/wife), Jules is convinced of his exceptionality, that grants him access to a wider set of choices for his future, represented by the promise of fortune contained in the Myth of the Frontier, which is compatible with his affinity to violence. Instead, Maureen cannot perceive herself as the protagonist of her own life, and comes to be dependent on men in order to attain some stability (a dependence which is one of the basic motives of the patriarchal family).

They eventually achieve a partial success: Maureen tries to escape from her class by marriage, whereas Jules embraces violence and opportunism during the Detroit riots of 1967, in which he is able to attain a classically Oatesian climatic release through violence that liberates him from his previous apathy. From the riots, Jules learns that instability and chaos are a natural part of the human experience; whereas order and stability are fleeting. Jules has been found to be one of Oates's higher characters, individuals who are representative of a certain society, and who need liberation in order to grow: they may become violent if they do not obtain space to develop. This links him to other characters such as Swan.

At the end of the novel, Maureen and Jules proclaim their love for each other even if their future contact will be limited or either nonexistent, which proves the lasting permanence of family bonds. In conclusion, despite standing at opposite positions for most of their lives, Maureen and Jules are constant companions and models for each other.

In general, we have demonstrated that the traditional nuclear family in the corpus is formed by extremely rigid subsystems, which, along with a set of obligations, results in an almost unbearable pressure for the characters. As a consequence of this rigidity, when any change

threatens the established order, it has destructive effects and causes the distortion of roles along with role confusion or role reversal, and the emergence of violence. Most of these families are founded upon the four basic concepts that sustain the traditional nuclear family: privacy, property, protection and gender discrimination.

Privacy was found to be, first, illusory, because it is impossible for families to be totally isolated in contemporary societies, since they are mediated and influenced by institutions such as school, the workplace, or the law. We have simultaneously debunked the myth of nuclear families as safe havens: instead, they have often been revealed as hiding spaces for a violence which is generally not seen, admitted, and/or acted upon by the rest of the community. Property was revealed as one of the most problematic traits in these families, which places both economic resources and the control of the destiny of the members of the family on the hands of a single individual: the father/husband, the head of the family. This is closely linked to gender discrimination, which places women in a submissive position, while it negates full recognition of their true procreative and creative powers, as well as their autonomy. Besides, male characters have also suffered the negative consequences of an exclusive commitment to their breadwinner role. Finally, protection was disclosed as a fallacy in many cases, because characters often face violence in the supposed safe environment of their houses.

Adherence to a certain role was also found to be problematic in the corpus. We have detected a tendency for the characters to perceive the members of their families simply as roles. This is seen in *Mulvaneys*, where siblings can only truly perceive one another once they have abandoned the family house; and in *Wonderland*, where Helene and Jesse see each other as mainly a husband and a wife deprived of any other personal traits. In this sense, we have emphasized Oates's belief in the importance of constantly contemplating and perceiving the beloved person as she/he evolves, and assimilating all these transformations. We have also seen the problems derived from defining oneself in a merely performative manner, for instance, by being exclusively a good-provider, such as Elwood and Edward after his divorce, which leaves them dissatisfied; or Cressida and Marianne

during their wanderings, being defined by their jobs because they have temporarily lost her sense of identity.

In relation to this, this study has demonstrated the difficulties of attaining a balance between the family ties and one's autonomous and independent identity within the limits and restrictions of the traditional nuclear family, that is, the difficulty of integrating the family role as part of one's own self. This dilemma leads some Oatesian characters like Shelley Vogel to run away from their homes, most of the times with terrible consequences. In conclusion, the rigidity of roles and of subsystems is damaging. In general, the male characters from the corpus are worse prepared to face transformations than female characters, as seen in the case of Carleton, Willard, Grandpa Vogel, Michael, Edward, Zeno, Clara, Loretta, Marianne, Lucille, Arlette, etc. However, there are exceptions, like Jules, Maureen, Krista and Juliet.

Besides, the high demands of the family roles may provoke dissatisfaction, depression, and self-loss. Alternatively, at times, these demands, linked to expectations, cause a role reversal: Clara is a daughter/mother in her Family System of Origin, Lowry is a lover/father to whom Clara is a lover/daughter, Richard is a son/parent, Mrs. Pedersen is a wife/daughter to her husband, and Maureen is a daughter/mother/wife. This proves that family relationships are constantly evolving, but not always in a positive manner.

The transformations of the self, and of family structures, inevitably result in the occurrence of some type of loss. This is reflected in the corpus in the recurrent episode in which a character unsuccessfully tries to come back home (either at a literal or a metaphorical level). This scene becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of re-acquiring lost identity traits or structures. Carleton loses his place as a settled farmer, Marianne loses her place as the virginal daughter (moreover, they both literally lose their homes); Mrs. Pedersen loses her identity as a single carefree young girl, Brett loses his identity as a nice boy and Cressida loses her role as the exceptional/smart/mocking daughter. Even when these characters do indeed return home, like Brett and Cressida, they are not the same persons they were when they left. The trauma caused by some of these transformations has demonstrated the importance of

verbalization in the process of recovery, as seen mainly in *Mulvaneys*, *Wonderland* and *Bird*.

Names and nicknames have proved to be powerful symbols of identity, which either provide or deprive characters from a sense of belonging. Thus, for Clara, Mrs. Pedersen and Helene, their maiden surnames provide them with some sense of protection and reliance; Swan is convinced that his names are able to shape of his future; Richard contemptuously calls his mother “Nada” (“nothing”); for the Mulvaneys, family nicknames are at first symbols of affection that eventually turn into evidences of the power dynamics within the family; and Jesse’s different surnames provide him with an opportunity to start again. Names are keepers of memory, as seen in Jesse’s homage to his murdered sisters when naming his daughters, and in Carleton’s mythical approach to the name of his ancestors, which provides him with a certain sense of belonging. In *Garden*, we also perceive how the mother’s connection with the baby, symbolically represented by the navel (the durable mark of the umbilical cord), is replaced by the link with the Father, who makes a claim over his progeny. This is represented in the novel by the substitution of the protagonist’s name Swan, chosen by his mother Clara, with the name Steven, chosen by his stepfather Revere.

When discussing the family influence in the formation of the self, we have demonstrated (in *Wonderland* or *Carthage*) that family bonds cannot be effortlessly (or at times even entirely) destroyed; and that both a lack of permanent referents (as in Jesse’s case) and an excessive influence of referents can be damaging (as in Cressida’s case). Alternatively, during the assessment of identity, some cases of *doppelgänger*s emerge: namely Jesse/Dr. Vogel, bed-ridden-Maureen/mirror-Maureen, and Aaron/Krull. These split personalities may be considered as evidences of what Jung has labelled as the shadow, which holds their darkest and most repressed desires.

Moreover, when trying to construct their identities, a high number of the characters from the corpus turn to fiction, which usually results in confusion between what is real and what is fiction, as seen in Richard and Nada, who try to become authors of their lives by being a sniper and a Russian political exile, but run the risk of being turned into

characters; similarly Maureen tries to triumph over her adverse circumstances by enacting a romance pulp character, and Jules adopts a series of romantic figures. In the corpus, Oates warns that the enactment of plans in order to construct an identity may result in an evasion instead of a realization of selfhood.

Similarly, practically all the characters of the corpus strive to gain control over deterministic forces, or simply over the circumstances of their lives. We have detected a pattern of increasing triumph over deterministic forces: Swan is engulfed by his circumstances; in *them*, the characters try to fight against these forces; and Jesse is also obsessed with control and wrongfully thinks he can control everything, even life and death. However, Aaron's realization of the power of his will when refraining from bullying Ben any longer is a mark of the evolution of the Oatesian characters who gradually become liberated from the constraints of determinism.

Violence has been presented as the result of the rigidity of roles in most of the novels, but it has been also revealed as a climatic release/liberation, noticed in Jules at the Detroit riots, Patrick's abduction of the rapist, Aaron's bullying, Jesse's cutting himself, etc. In other occasions, such as in the case of Noel and Shelley, violence is only disguised as a liberation. At some other times, violence arises when the characters are unable to understand the position of each other, as seen, mostly, in the Wonderland Quartet.

When considering the formation of identity, we have demonstrated how the irruption of unexpected events (in this case mainly violent ones) makes the characters reconsider their daily assumptions and question their lives and previous adscriptions, as seen in all the novels from the corpus. This is seen, namely, in Carleton's assault on Clara, Nada's murder, the murder-suicide committed by Willard, Marianne's rape, Maureen's physical assault by Furlong, Jules's shooting by Nadine, Zoe's and Edward's violent deaths and Cressida's minor assault by Brett triggering her disappearance.

Regarding the evolution of families from a historical perspective, we have noticed that female characters are mostly passive in the first novels of the corpus (Nadine, Maureen) or have only indirect access to power (Clara). But slowly, women are the ones who question their

position and overturn rigid bonds that tied them to traditional enactments: Nada tries to balance her role as a mother and professional writer, Corinne is able to open her own business and reunite the family, and Krista runs away from a dominant bond with a man. Daughters are also able to rediscover and recover the lost bond to their mothers, as in *Mulvaney's*, and sons become increasingly less violent than their fathers. We might find a tentative example of this last case in *Wonderland*. Besides, we have traced a pattern of sons dying (*Garden, Expensive*) that turns into fathers dying (*them, Mulvaney's, Wonderland*): this implies that the aggressive figure of the omnipotent Father is waning in the corpus. Finally, we have appreciated the emergence of longer life stages, which is translated in longer periods of education and a delay of events such as work, cohabitation or marriage, etc. The corpus also exhibits a definite tendency toward the democratization of families, as seen in the different types of marriage, the gradual loss of authority of the Father along with an empowerment of the mother, in the fact that fathers show an increasing interest in their children, in the gradual ascription to less authoritarian types of parenting, etc.

Finally, food has been analyzed as an apparently minor question that acquires great relevance in the corpus. Food is employed by Oates in several metaphorical manners, namely as a reflection of family dynamics: overfeeding becomes a representation of over-loving; while overeating reflects the need to be emotionally fulfilled, to overcome anxiety/trauma or to possess others, as well as representing a bloated ego. The refusal to eat is often related to female characters who have troubled bonds with their bodies. This is mainly caused by a rejection toward sex or by the wish to exert one's will. Finally, the image of characters devouring one another is a symbol of domination, very usual in patriarchal nuclear families.

To conclude, we must highlight some questions that have not been analyzed in depth due to lack of space, and which could become the base of further studies. Generally, we have focused this study in the relationships between mother-child and father-child, which were succinctly completed with the examination of the relationships between a couple and between siblings. In further analysis, we could examine these two latter types of relationships, focusing as well on the

interference of the extended family. Moreover, the interconnections between family and violence in Oates are so profound that could justify a new study, along with the examination of the links between familial and extrafamilial violence.

There are some other specific questions that could be explored in further studies. First, the interconnections between vertical mobility along the social classes and horizontal mobility around the country, in *Garden*, *Expensive* and *them*, along with the question of rootlessness, and of running away from home, seen also in *Wonderland*. Second, the use of style to emphasize the theme of the novels, as noticed in *them*'s mock-naturalism and in *Wonderland*'s Gothic and its connection to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* novels. Third, how social events often reflect individual occurrences, as seen in the Great Depression in *Garden*, Kennedy's assassination in *Wonderland*, or the Iraq War in *Carthage*.







## APPENDIX

*A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) is the first book of the Wonderland Quartet, composed as well by *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969) and *Wonderland* (1971). In 1973, Oates asserted that she was writing a series of novels that dealt with “the complex distribution of power in the United States” (“Focus” 42), and in fact the quartet portrays American social class struggles: in *Garden*, the main character ascends from being “white trash” to a comfortable social position; in *Expensive*, the particulars of middle-high class are exposed; *them* describes the complicated lives of the working class, whereas *Wonderland* follows the path of a boy born to a humble family who eventually becomes a reputed doctor. Oates admits that *Garden*, *Expensive* and *them*

have a lot in common, and what these three novels, which differ considerably in subject matter, language, and tone, have in common, is the use of a youthful protagonist in his or her quintessentially American adventures. All three novels were conceived as critiques of America—American culture, American values, American dreams. And they are all about class consciousness. (“Conversations” 184)

*Wonderland* also perfectly fits these characteristics, as well as Oates assertion that *Garden*, *Expensive* and *them* deal with “a male imagination and a consciousness that seeks to liberate itself from certain confinements” (“Interview. a” *Conversations with Joyce* 9). In *Garden*, Swan Walpole tries to find his true identity by looking into his parents’ past, but at the same time he feels entrapped and doomed by that past. In *Expensive*, Richard Everett wishes to reconstruct and gain freedom from the memory of his late mother, who keeps on haunting him. In *them*, Jules Wendall restlessly fights to overcome the barriers of the working class and raise into higher society. *Wonderland* perfectly fits these parameters by presenting a male character in search for liberation

in the figure of Jesse Vogel, who tries to find identity traits in a series of referential paternal figures, while at the same time trying to avoid acquiring their violent tendencies. Finally, all the novels of the quartet, with the exception of *Garden*, are settled around the area of Detroit, Michigan, where Oates lived during four years which greatly influenced her writing.

*A Garden of Earthly Delights* was nominated for the 1967 National Book Award. It had respectable sales as well as critical acclaim (Johnson *Invisible* 152). In 2003, Oates published a revised edition of the novel.

The plot starts at some point during the decades of 1920s and 1930s. The protagonist, Clara Walpole, belongs to a family of migrant fruit pickers who constantly move from state to state in their search for jobs. Her parents are Carleton and Pearl Walpole; she has two elder siblings, Sharleen and Mike; and two younger ones, Rodwell and Roosevelt. The living conditions of their community are rather grueling: violence is common, there is no privacy; and children, who are commonly neglected or abused, rarely attend school. In fact, Clara works with her family in the fields and takes care of the house and her siblings from an early age, after their mother's death at childbirth. In general, she has a good relationship with her father: she is his favorite child. After becoming a widower, Carleton starts a relationship with a younger woman called Nancy, and they have a baby, Esther Jean. At fourteen years old, Clara meets a young man called Lowry, who refuses to become her lover when he realizes how young she really is. When Carleton learns that she has spent the night outside the house, he physically assaults Clara. She is utterly shocked and runs away from home with Lowry. The next day, Carleton is repentant and goes in search of Clara but cannot find her. He dies a short time afterwards, something that Clara will never know. With Lowry's help, Clara settles in the town of Tintern, where she gets a job and lives on her own in a small room. Clara falls in love with Lowry and is constantly waiting for him to visit her, but he is often away on business trips. After a few years, Clara and Lowry have intimate relationships. She gets pregnant, but before she finds the moment to tell Lowry, he announces that he is fleeing to Mexico to escape from some sort of trouble, and disappears

from her life. Clara then starts a relationship with an affluent married man from town, Curt Revere, whose wife Marguerite is seriously ill. Revere has three sons: Clark, Jonathan and Robert. Revere thinks that he is the father of Clara's baby and he buys her a house, promising to marry her as soon as his sick wife dies. At the beginning, Clara, who does not really love Revere but enjoys the life style he provides her with, finds it difficult to overcome Lowry's abandonment, but she eventually forgets him and becomes satisfied with her life. Clara gives up her work and gives birth at seventeen years old. Revere names the baby Steven, and Clara nicknames him Swan, as a symbol of strength and fearlessness. Four years later, in 1937, Lowry unexpectedly returns and meets his son. Although Swan does not know the details, he suspects that his father is actually Lowry. Lowry asks Clara to come back with him but she refuses. In 1940, Marguerite dies and Clara marries Revere and goes to live with him, acquiring thus a new social status. One day, while Swan and Robert are hunting, Swan pushes Robert, whose gun accidentally goes off and kills him. Swan grows up to be a sensitive young man with artistic inclinations. He feels immensely burdened and divided by the urge to inherit and work Revere's land and his interest in cultivating himself by going to college. In the end, he renounces to go to college and to a possible life dedicated to art and starts working for his father. By this time, Clark has married and left the house and Jonathan has run away. At the age of twenty-six years old, Swan lets his frustration and resentment explode, and he kills Revere with a firearm, points the gun at his mother but does not harm her, and finally commits suicide. The conclusion of the novel shows Clara in her mid-forties living in a nursing home.

*Garden*, whose main protagonist is Clara Walpole, nonetheless is centered on the three most important men of her life: her father Carleton, her lover Lowry and her son Swan. Carleton, Lowry and Swan are precisely the titles of the three parts of the book. Significantly, Clara has no section of her own. As we have argued, the Wonderland Quartet is mainly focused around male characters, which Oates favors over female characters at the beginning of her career.

*Expensive People* (1968) is the second book of the Wonderland Quartet. It was nominated for the National Book Award in 1968. It

presents the form of a memoir written around eight years after the main events, which take place around the 1960s in the affluent suburbs of Detroit, Michigan.

This novel is narrated by the young man Richard Everett, who evokes his life as an eleven-year-old child living with his parents Elwood Everett and Natashya Romanov Everett and how, according to him, he eventually murdered his mother. From the beginning, Richard announces his intention of reconstructing the events leading to his mother's death; and afterward, to kill himself by overeating.

The Everetts live a luxurious life: Nada is a professional writer whereas Elwood has a series of unspecified well-paid jobs. At the beginning of the novel, the family moves to Ferwood, a high-class suburb. Richard's parents are quite demanding and distant to him. Their strained relationship is exposed by means of Richard's eavesdropping and spying on them. This also constitutes a narrative tactic on the part of Oates to help to fill the blanks that a first-person point of view creates. Nada leaves the family house on several occasions because she feels the need to be independent. Richard's relationship with his mother is extremely complicated: he greatly admires her good looks and intelligence, but at the same time he dislikes her apparent shallowness and the disregard that she exhibits for her own writing. He is fascinated by her complex personality and her mysterious nature: her origins are unclear, but she asserts that her family of origin was composed by exiled Russian noblemen who went into exile to the United States. One day, Richard reads Nada's outline for a short story entitled "The Sniper," in which a young man frightens people by shooting at them until he eventually murders someone. After this, Richard enacts the story by getting a shotgun and starts shooting at the neighbors. He does not kill any of them, but in the end, he asserts to have killed Nada. He is never discovered, and when he confesses the murder to his therapist, he does not believe him. In fact, the narrative only presents Richard's point of view, which is highly unreliable. What seems to be true is that Nada has died, most probably murdered. After she dies, Richard finds out that her true name was Nancy Romanow, and that her family is composed by Ukrainian immigrants that reside in upstate New York, instead of the Russian political émigrés she had proclaimed.

*Expensive* has a triptych structure, typical in Oates. It mixes black humor, surrealism, the grotesque, social realism, and parody within the psychologically realistic framework of Richard's confession (Friedman *Joyce* 57-58). Besides, *Expensive* is Oates's first step into metafiction, as Cologne-Brookes argues (*Dark Eyes* 40). In fact, the novel presents a complete short story written by Nada Everett, as well as the narrator's speculations about the reviews that his novel would get. Oates's metafiction will evolve through the decades until it reaches the impressive complexity of the novel *My Sister, My Love*, whose structure, as well as the social class of the narrator, is reminiscent of *Expensive People*.

*them* (1969) is the third book of the Wonderland Quartet. It received the National Book Award for 1970; and in 2000, it was reprinted in a revised edition. The novel stems from the 1967 racial riots in Detroit, which Oates experienced from a close perspective. As she admits, the novel was imagined "as a series of events that have more or less historical validity" ("Interview. a" *Conversations with Joyce* 8), which "could not have been written before the 'long, hot summer' of urban race riots of 1967" ("Conversations" 188). The original edition of *them* narrates the story of the Wendall family, extracted from the reminiscences of Maureen Wendall, Oates's fictitious student at the University of Detroit. Oates declared that the narrated events "happened to people whom I either had known or had heard about or had read about in the newspapers, so that most of the novel is very real" (Oates "Interview. a" *Conversations with Joyce* 8).

The action of *them* begins in 1937 by describing the life of the teenager Loretta Botsford with her unnamed widowed father and her brother Brock in a depressed neighborhood. Loretta sleeps with a boy, Bernie Malin, and when she wakes up, she discovers that her brother has shot Bernie on her bed, killing him. She runs away from home and eventually meets a policeman, Howard Wendall, who has sexual intercourse with her. She later marries him. Loretta's first baby is Jules, and it is not clear whether his father is Bernie or Howard. The couple has two daughters: Maureen and Betty. After Howard is fired for taking bribes, the family goes to live with Howard's parents in their farm, a situation that does not please Loretta, especially when Howard is sent

to Europe to fight in the Second World War. Later on, the family moves to Detroit, and after her husband's death, Howard's mother will come to live with them as well. The family lives at various addresses in depressed areas of the city. When Jules is sixteen years old, Howard dies in an accident at work, and subsequently, Howard's mother goes to live in a nursing home. Jules soon goes to live on his own, working at several jobs and dreaming of making a fortune in the West, while Betty grows to be an independent girl who has a gang and frequently gets into trouble. Maureen, in turn, is a studious girl who feels suffocated by her loud and meddling family. Loretta marries a man called Patrick Furlong and they have a son, Randolph, who will grow up to behave like Betty and form his own gang. At the age of sixteen years old, Maureen starts to get obsessed with running away from a life which oppresses her. She wants to get a job in order to attain her goals, but her mother forbids her to do so. She eventually prostitutes herself in order to obtain money. Some time afterwards, Furlong discovers her secret money and physically assaults her. As a result, Maureen stays in a shocked state for thirteen months, refusing to speak. Loretta divorces Furlong (who is imprisoned for four months for the assault) but she does not believe the rumors of Maureen's prostitution. During this period, Loretta's brother Brock unexpectedly reappears and after reconciling with Loretta, he comes to live with the family. Brock is caring towards Maureen and helps her to recover. Meanwhile, Jules falls in love with an affluent young girl called Nadine Greene, who has problems relating to others and feels entrapped by her environment. The couple runs away and travels to Texas, where they survive by committing robberies. When Jules suddenly becomes sick, Nadine unexpectedly abandons him in a motel. In the meantime, Maureen recovers and starts to attend classes at college, where she meets the teacher Joyce Carol Oates, to whom she writes a series of personal letters. Jules also recovers and some time later meets Nadine again, who is now married. They have a troubled affair and she eventually shoots him, but he survives the wound. In the meantime, Brock becomes seriously ill and after spending a period in hospital, he walks away without being discharged and disappears. Besides, Maureen decides to escape from her environment by marrying her teacher Jim Randolph after he divorces

his wife. Jules becomes a pimp and gets involved with the counterculture of the time. Jules personally experiences the Detroit racial riots of 1967, from which Loretta takes refuge at the YMCA and then at some volunteers' house. By the end of the novel, both Jules and Betty keep contact with their mother, but Maureen, who has moved to a better neighborhood with her husband and is now pregnant, refuses to contact her family because she wants to start a new life. Jules decides to finally travel to the West and to attempt to have a relationship with Nadine once again, so he opportunistically becomes the assistant of Doctor Pierce, the head of the United Action Against Poverty Program in Detroit, because the group is heading to California.

*Wonderland* (1971) is the fourth and last book of the Wonderland Quartet. After its publication, Oates realized that she was not satisfied with its conclusion, and thus wrote a revision with a different ending. The original version of *Wonderland* presents a male main focalizer, Jesse, in his struggle to become a doctor and find his own identity. According to Oates, this book examines "a crisis in American society by way of one representative man" ("Interview" *Joyce. Conversations 1970-2006*, 165). The narrative starts in 1939 in Yewville, New York, where fourteen-year-old Jesse Harte lives with his parents Willard and Nancy, his sister Jean, two years older than him, and his younger siblings Shirley and Bob, who are eleven and five years old, respectively. They are extremely poor and live cramped in a small house, a situation which brings great stress to the family. Moreover, Nancy is pregnant, and her husband feels a great anxiety about this. One evening, Willard picks his son up from his part-time job and brings him home, where Jesse discovers that he has murdered all the family. Willard tries to kill him as well, but Jesse manages to escape, wounded. In the end, his father shoots himself and dies in hospital. Jesse spends some time recovering in hospital, and then comes to live with his maternal grandfather, Grandpa Vogel. Jesse enjoys the freedom of his grandfather's farm and being in contact with nature, but Grandpa Vogel eventually reveals in harsh terms his negative view of Jesse's family of origin and reproaches him the high expenses of his hospital's stay. Jesse feels betrayed and runs away. Then, he is taken in by some relatives: an uncle, an aunt, and a cousin called Fritz. They are nice to him but the

situation is tense to all of them so, feeling terribly guilty, they send him to an orphanage, the Niagara County Home for Boys. Jesse understands their decision and does not resent them. Soon afterward, he is legally adopted by the Pedersen family of Lockport, composed by Doctor Karl Pedersen, his wife Mary and their children Frederick and Hilda. Jesse legally becomes Jesse Pedersen. Dr. Pedersen is an extremely dominant figure who wants Jesse to follow his steps in medicine by becoming a doctor and inheriting his clinic. The family is subjugated to the doctor: he demands that everyone fulfils her/his role perfectly. Frederick is a talented musician and Hilda has a gift for mathematics, but neither of them is satisfied with their lives, since their father forces them to dedicate their whole existence to their talent. Their mother feels entrapped by conforming to the role of perfect mother/wife, and she turns to drinking. Some years later, Mrs. Pedersen tells Jesse about Dr. Pedersen's secret sadistic inclinations: he has psychologically mistreated her for years. She then begs Jesse to help her to leave her husband, and she flees to a hotel with Jesse's assistance; but Dr. Pedersen discovers them and declares Jesse dead to him in a letter which includes a check for one thousand dollars, while he forces his wife to come back home. Therefore, Jesse goes back to be Jesse Vogel. He studies medicine at Ann Arbor University and becomes a doctor, while he grows obsessed with having a perfect family. He marries Helene Cady, the daughter of an eminent doctor. Although she did not wish to have children (in fact, she considers performing an abortion during her first pregnancy, but she changes her mind in the end), Helene has two daughters with Jesse, Jeanne and Michele Ellen (Shelley). The family leads a comfortable life and Jesse opens his own clinic. However, Shelley has a troubled relationship with her dominant father and does not fit his expectations. When she is around fifteen years old, she runs away with a man called Noel. Through her letters to her father, Jesse finally locates her in Canada, terribly drugged and seriously ill (possibly from jaundice and hepatitis), and he takes her with him. Jesse embarks with her in a boat and they drift into the Lake Ontario, while Shelley agonizes. Jesse, desperate, wonders why everyone abandons him. By dawn, a cruiser picks their boat up. In the revised version, the ending is altered: after Jesse finds Shelley, he offers Noel money in



order to take his daughter with him. Noel accepts. Then Jesse walks out with Shelley (who is not so ill as in the original version of *Wonderland*), while Jesse proclaims that nobody is going to die that night.

As Oates points out, in this novel “[b]ackground is foreground [...] *Wonderland* is political in genesis, however individualized its characters and settings. It could not have been conceived, still less written, at any other time than in post-1967 America, when divisive hatreds between generation over the war in Vietnam, and what was called, perhaps optimistically, the ‘counterculture,’ raged daily” (“Afterword” *Wonderland* 2006, 481). Therefore, she adds, the plot of the novel moves from the Depression through Second World War, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, and includes the turbulent decade of the 1960s (from 1963 to 1973, approximately).

*We Were the Mulvaney*s was first published in 1996. It was a widely acclaimed book which was awarded the New York Times Notable Book of the Year. Actually, Oates has described it as “the novel closest to my heart” (Oates “Interview Reader’s” n. p.). In 2002, it was adapted into a film of the same title directed by Peter Werner and starring Beau Bridges and Blythe Danner.

*We Were the Mulvaney*s presents the story of a family from the perspective of the youngest son, Judd, when he is an adult. The family is formed by the parents, Michael and Corinne, and their four children, Mike, Patrick, Marianne and Judd. They live in High Point farm, located in the small town of Mt. Ephraim, New York. The story starts in 1976, a year in which their apparently ideal lives are brutally shaken when Marianne is raped by one of her classmates, Zachary Lundt. She refuses to report on her aggressor, and tries to find consolation in religion. Her father is unable to cope with pain, and cannot understand why she refuses to blame her rapist. The older brothers are outraged, especially Patrick, who plans to take revenge against the rapist. Finally, as her father is unable to come to terms with reality, Marianne is sent to live with a relative. Michael refuses to see his daughter again, but he spends all his money and time in a fruitless legal battle against the rapist. Marianne, who used to be a cheerful and popular girl, suffers now from a low self-esteem, and starts a wandering live, moving frequently and working at several jobs while avoiding any intimate

connection with anyone: even when she falls in love with a man who also loves her, she rejects him and leaves again. Her mother adopts a rather detached attitude towards her. The Mulvaney family starts to disintegrate: the remaining children gradually leave home, whereas the father loses his business, physically abuses his wife and separates from her, and eventually turns to a heavy drinking habit which will finally cause his death. Meanwhile, Patrick abducts Zachary with the purpose of killing him, but he eventually restrains himself and liberates him, feeling much relieved. In the end, when Marianne, now an adult woman, is able to see her father again in his death bed, it is not clear that he actually recognizes her. Marianne eventually finds some peace of mind and recovers her self-esteem. She marries a veterinarian. The novel closes some years afterwards, when all the family, including the partners of all the Mulvaney children and their own children, gathers up for a reunion.

*Little Bird of Heaven* was published in 2009. Although it is not Oates's most famous novel, it was well received: *The Washington Post* remarked it is "a powerful novel. [...] Her unsentimental language makes a high-lonesome kind of poetry out of otherwise sordid and unremarkable circumstance" (Lindgren n. p.). This novel has two focalizers: Krista Diehl, who relates the events in first-person, and Aaron Kruller, whose chapters adopt a third person point of view. The events take place in Sparta, New York. The narrative opens in the 1980s with the brutal murder of Zoe Kruller, a local band singer, who has temporarily abandoned her son Aaron and her husband Delray to pursue her music career. The main suspects are Zoe's husband, as well as her married lover Edward Diehl, the father of Krista. The members of the Diehl family have different reactions to the murder and the subsequent events: Edward's wife Lucille and their oldest son Ben tangibly reject him due to his unfaithful behavior, but Krista is still emotionally attached to him. Lucille separates from her husband, who receives an order of restraint from the family. Meanwhile, Krista falls in love with Aaron Kruller, who one night saves her from a drug overdose and soon afterwards molests and tries to strangle her. Some time later, Edward Diehl fetches his daughter from high school and holds her prisoner in a motel room in order to force his wife to meet him and talk things over.

He is not successful: the police eventually shoot him to death. The Diehls leave the town after this, while the Krullers go on living in Sparta. Zoe's murder is never officially solved and her husband finally dies, most likely from alcoholism. At the end of the novel, Krista has an independent life working as a paralegal in Peekskill, New York, away from her family. She has not seen Aaron since the night when she almost had an overdose, but he suddenly visits her to inform her that Zoe's friend Jacky DeLucca wants to speak to both of them. They go back to Sparta to meet Jacky, and the woman confesses the truth to Krista and Aaron: Zoe was killed by Anton Csaba, the violent owner of a club with whom Zoe had had an affair. Both Aaron and Krista feel extremely relieved for having confirmed their respective fathers' innocence; and unexpectedly, they sleep together. Aaron asks her to stay with him in Sparta, but Krista notices his possessive and conflictive nature and goes back to Peekskill.

*Carthage* was published in January 2014. It had a good critical reception: *The Washington Post* described it as "brilliant" (Chaon n. p.), while *The Guardian* emphasized its resemblances to *We Were the Mulvaney*s, since it explores "similar territory with a new, Dostoevskian rigour" (Burnside n. p.). In fact, both novels deal with loss, homecoming, and traumas. The plot of *Carthage* covers the years 2005 to 2012, and introduces an upper-middle class family living in Carthage, New York. The parents, Zeno and Arlette, have two daughters named Juliet and Cressida, who are said to be "the pretty one" and "the smart one," respectively. Juliet is engaged to a boy named Brett Kincaid, who has been a soldier in the Iraq War, from where he has come back physically impaired and psychologically troubled: in the war, he witnessed several types of abuse against civilians, including the gang rape and murder of a young girl. Brett starts to physically abuse Juliet, and eventually he breaks the engagement. One night, Cressida disappears. After searching for her, it is known that Brett was the last person to see her. Brett was drunk and does not remember the events clearly, but he confesses to having killed and buried her. Although the corpse is not recovered, Brett is charged with voluntary manslaughter and imprisoned at the Clinton Correction Facility for Men in Dannemora, New York. Seven years elapse, during which Juliet leaves

the town to avoid the media, and afterwards gets married and has two children. Zeno never loses hope that his daughter is still alive; whereas his wife assumes her death, and organizes memorial ceremonies in her honor. Her husband does not agree with this, and they eventually separate in cordial terms. It is later on revealed that Cressida is not dead: the night she disappeared, she had declared her love to Brett, but he had rejected and shoved her. Despaired, she jumped into the river and was found miles away by a woman called Haley, who took care of her as a kind of substitute for her deceased little sister, Sabbath McSwain. Cressida, convinced that her family had never loved her, adopts Sabbath's identity. During this period of time, she avoids thinking about them. She resides at various places with Haley, who eventually leaves her and goes to live with her lover. Cressida finds some emotional stability working as an assistant of Professor Cornelius Hinton. She unexpectedly has an epiphany during a guided visit to an execution chamber at a prison, the Orion Maximum Security Correctional Facility in Florida. She considers the possible consequences of her disappearance for Brett and her family and decides to return. She is gladly received by everybody, except her sister, who despite being nice to her, cannot forgive her for all the pain she has brought into their lives.

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